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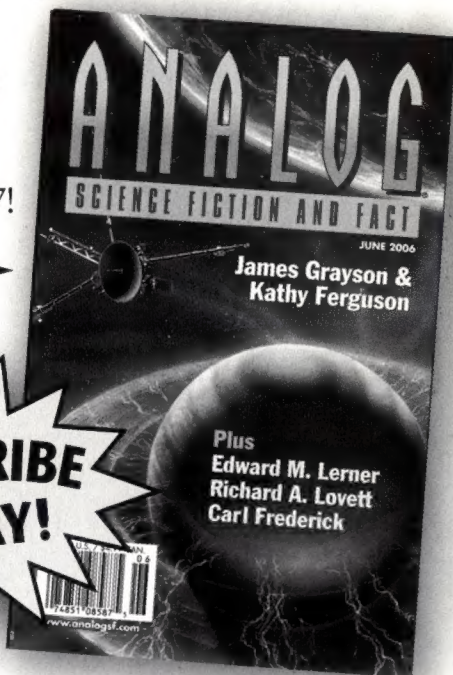
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DECEMBER 2006

Vol. 30 No. 12 (Whole Number 371)
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Cover Art for "Lord Weary's Empire"
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NOVELLA

- 100 LORD WEARY'S EMPIRE MICHAEL SWANWICK

NOVELETTE

- 12 YELLOW CARD MAN PAOLO BACIGALUPI

SHORT STORIES

- 39 PLAUSIBLE ROBERT REED
50 IMMUNITY SUSAN FOREST
60 SAFE! BRIAN W. ALDISS
78 A DYING FALL CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
86 THE GOLDEN RECORD IAN CREASEY

POETRY

- 5 COPYRIGHT NOTICE, 2525 DAVID LIVINGSTONE CLINK
47 MOTIVE, CAUSE, WEAPON GREG BEATTY
48 AN ECCENTRIC IN ORBIT LAUREL WINTER
141 RAIN HOLLY PHILLIPS

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 EDITORIAL: HOW MY HEART BREAKS
WHEN I HEAR THAT SONG SHEILA WILLIAMS
6 REFLECTIONS: FLASHING BEFORE MY EYES ROBERT SILVERBERG
77 SCIENCE FICTION SUDOKU RUTH CRABTREE
136 ON BOOKS PETER HECK
142 THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR ERWIN S. STRAUSS

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HOW MY HEART BREAKS WHEN I HEAR THAT SONG

With her ability to pull the perfect quote from memory, my mother would often seize the upper hand in an argument with my father. On more than one occasion, a well-timed citation stunned him into silence. I suppose my dad had the last word when he had one of her favorite statements of exasperation carved into her headstone:

Not for this

Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur,
other gifts

Have followed

I can reprint these few words from William Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" because, in the United States, most works published before 1923 have passed into public domain (PD) and can be used for any purpose. Due to their PD status, I can use these lines to construct an editorial that builds on our shared cultural heritage. It wouldn't be so easy to do so, though, if the poem had been published after January 1, 1923. Later works do not pass into public domain until after they have been published for ninety-five years and their authors have been dead for seventy, whichever is later.

Our laws, which firmly discourage plagiarism and protect the artist's rights to his or her creation, can also be maddeningly restrictive. The past is available and can be drawn upon for use in creative works, as long as it's a past that existed before most artists were born. The writer can borrow from Shakespeare, from Milton, L. Frank Baum, the King James translation of the Bible, and

J.M. Barrie, but there are severe restrictions against borrowing from the cultural world that writers grew up in. John Gardner could find *Grendel* in the traditional story of Beowulf, but a new author would most likely not be free to fashion his own tale about this monster or the epic's heroic warrior with quotes from Seamus Heaney's translation.

In spoken language, whether we quote from Wordsworth, the Bible, *Dirty Harry*, *Terminator II*, Bob Dylan, or Britney Spears, we convey thoughts to each other with the aid of this shared history. The breadth of this verbal freedom is not available to the author.

There are numerous instances in stories where it would be perfectly natural for a character to think of or hear a few lines from a piece of popular music. Authors may cite the title of a song, but the actual lines are generally not available. I've rooted many of these lines out of stories while editing for *Asimov's*. A writer can attempt to get permission for the use of these lyrics, but that attempt is often frustrating as well. A few years ago we purchased a story that contained a pertinent quote from A.E. Housman. We held onto the story for several months while the author sent three letters to the publisher. When no answer was received, he finally decided to make some minor changes to the manuscript and quote from Tennyson instead.

Not all attempts to get permission are unsuccessful. In November 1986, we published a story, "Elephant," by Susan Palwick. Although

the required credit line to Carlos Drummond de Andrade seemed to cover half the opening page, the publisher was quick to respond and had no difficulty with the use of the poem in the work. More than two decades ago, another author paid twenty-five dollars for permission to quote a Bruce Springsteen lyric. A few years later, when John Kessel and Jim Kelly were working on their novel, *Freedom Beach*, they planned to have a character play a tape of a John Lennon song in a cabaret. When they discovered that permission to do so would cost them five hundred dollars (which would have been a large chunk of the book's advance), they approached David Bowie's lawyers, but were disappointed to discover that Bowie's lyrics would run them a thousand dollars. I said, "Why don't you go to The Boss? After all, he's the man of the people." But they decided to have their character play a bebop version of Stephen Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer."

Authors have argued that there is a concept of "fair use" that should protect them, but the law doesn't seem to support that theory. Fair use is a complicated concept that does allow a reviewer to quote from a source. Our constitutional right to free speech also gives the editorialist the right to quote from an original source. Except for parody, though, the doctrine of fair use doesn't give the author permission to construct a story that uses the words of modern music or poetry.

In the year 2525, if copyright law doesn't change, writers will find they can quote Springsteen and The Beatles with abandon. It's unlikely, though, that such works will have the resonance they have in our own time. Unfortunately, future artists may not be any freer to draw upon the words of the contemporary poets and songwriters that influence them. They, too, will have to deal with the ruthless editor who demands a title change or cuts favorite lines from their best material. ○

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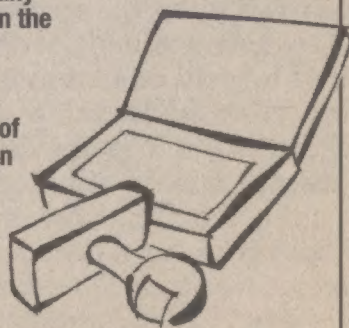
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—David Livingstone Clink



FLASHING BEFORE MY EYES

They say that when you drown, your whole life flashes before your eyes. I don't know whether that hoary cliché is true, and I don't see any particularly convenient way of testing it and reporting back to you. (If you half-drown, does *half* your life flash before your eyes?) But a superb book on the history of science fiction magazines has recently provided that flashing-before-my-eyes sensation for me, without requiring the uncomfortable necessity of prolonged aquatic submersion.

The book is *Transformations: The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines from 1950 to 1970*, published in 2005 by Liverpool University Press, and its author is Mike Ashley, a scholarly Brit with a passion for science fiction history. He has previously written such books as *Who's Who in Horror and Fantasy Fiction* and *Starlight Man* (a biography of Algernon Blackwood). In the 1970s he edited a four-part anthology series that presented a history-by-example of the science fiction magazines from 1926 to 1965. Now he has built upon the relatively brief historical prefaces of those four books to produce a far more comprehensive, even encyclopedic, three-volume work. Reading *Transformations*, the middle volume of this set of three, I got to relive in the most vivid way my own boyhood infatuation with science fiction magazines in the late 1940s and early 1950s and then the beginning and first flowering of my career as a writer.

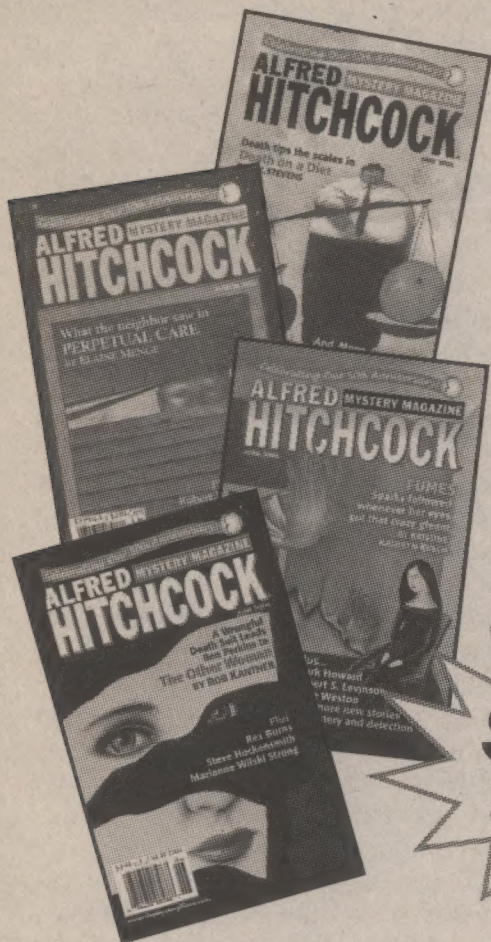
The first of Ashley's three magisterial histories, *The Time Machines*, which appeared in 2000 but has only recently come to my attention, covers the story of SF magazines from their primordial days—the era of the Frank Munsey pulps and such—through the Hugo Gernsback era and on through what we now call the Golden Age and the postwar era that succeeded it. The third, not yet published as I write this in the autumn of 2005, is *Gateways to Forever*, which will discuss the period from 1970 onward.

The Time Machines, which I read after *Transformations*, deals mostly with a period that is before my time as a reader, though I know a great deal about it, because soon after discovering the science fiction magazines I collected and read just about all of them from the start of the Gernsback era in 1926 onward. The book does, in its final chapter, touch on the 1948-50 period that marked the inception of my own activity as a reader and aspiring science fiction writer, and those pages did stir considerable nostalgia in me. But it is the second volume, *Transformations*, that held the real mojo for me, because the period covered in its four hundred fact-loaded pages corresponds exactly with the time of my own greatest involvement with SF, and reading it was a little like reading my own biography.

Ashley wasn't around in person for most of the years dealt with in *Transformations*. His own reading

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of science fiction, he tells us, goes back only to 1963. But nowhere is it decreed that historians must have had personal experience of the events about which they write, or else we would have had to do without Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico*, and many another classic work. But over a period of many years Ashley conducted extensive interviews with those who *were* on the scene in those days, myself included. It is a measure of the depth of Ashley's research and the keenness of his scholarly insight that I, who did live through every minute of that era and was for much of it a central figure in its events, can find no areas of serious disagreement with his account of what was happening in our field in that time or his interpretations of its significance to the greater story of magazine science fiction.

That more than a handful of the readers of this column will have the same sort of thrilling experience reading *Transformations* that I did is, of course, highly improbable, because their experience of the period it describes must necessarily be a second-hand one, whereas for me, as I said above, reading the book was like reliving my own youth. The earliest events with which it deals are now fifty years in the past and the most recent ones took place a generation ago, and very few who are still among us lived through that entire period. Those who are will get the same sort of special pleasure from the book that I did. But one does not have to be a former Roman emperor in order to find excitement in Gibbon's great book, nor a retired Spanish *conquistador* to appreci-

ate Prescott's. And to appreciate Ashley's splendid work one need only to have an active interest in the science fiction short story—which regular readers of this magazine surely have—and to care about the evolution of the magazines and writers out of which today's science fiction developed.

That evolution is lovingly, painstakingly, described. Thus Ashley opens his book with a vivid portrait of the 1950 science fiction scene, when the legendary editor John W. Campbell of *Astounding Science Fiction* (now *Analog*) was attempting with some difficulty to cling to his long-held dominant position in the field. Horace Gold's glossy new *Galaxy Science Fiction*, founded in 1950, was ferociously challenging *Astounding's* supremacy; and *Fantasy & Science Fiction* under Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas, which had presented its first issue appearance late in 1949, was making an end run around them both by offering a kind of elegant literary science fiction that had never been available to magazine readers before.

The presence of three such magazines at once, Ashley demonstrates, spurred the leading writers of the day (among them, and this is only a partial list, Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, Alfred Bester, Poul Anderson, James Blish, Ray Bradbury, Damon Knight, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Clifford D. Simak—a glorious roster indeed) to new levels of achievement that they probably would not have been able to reach with Campbell's one monthly magazine alone as their market. All through the 1940s Campbell, unchallenged at the top of the field, had been the one who defined what could or could not be

done; but now the two competing magazines were offering unprecedented creative opportunities to the writers whom Campbell had nurtured during that decade of sole rule, at a matching rate of payment. The results were spectacular. All during the early 1950s those three magazines were filled month after month with stories and novels that still hold a place as beloved classics, an astonishing string of titles that would require this whole column to mention. Would that we had such a three-way rivalry in science fiction publishing today!

But then *Transformations* goes on to tell the tale of how the lesser, lower-paying pulp magazines of the day, unprepossessing shaggy-edged items with names like *Planet Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, and *Amazing Stories*, upgraded themselves from juvenile-oriented action-adventure titles, opening their pages to the same sort of seriously conceived science fiction as the Big Three were publishing, and in so doing provided a developing ground for the new generation of writers. *Startling Stories* was under the editorship of Sam Merwin, Jr. and then of Sam Mines; *Planet* had come into the hands of a gifted young writer named Jerome Bixby; and *Amazing* now was run by a tough-minded mystery-story pro, Howard Browne. All of these men were weary of the old SF pulp for-

mulas and wanted to publish something new. So *Startling* gave Philip José Farmer's taboo-breaking novella "The Lovers," which had been rejected by the top-level magazines, a chance to reach print. *Startling* and its companion, *Thrilling Wonder*, also made room for a generous batch of dazzling novellas by another brilliant newcomer, Jack Vance. *Planet Stories*, formerly a kind of comic book in prose full of tales of space pirates and hideous aliens, ran Sturgeon's remarkable novella "The Incubi of Parallel X," hiding vivid experimental prose behind a standard pulp-magazine title, in its September 1951 issue, and was the first to print a story by Philip K. Dick, "Beyond Lies the Wub" in the issue of July 1952. Meanwhile the once-reviled *Amazing* and its companion *Fantastic*, now appearing in slicked-up formats, were paying Campbell-style money for such stories as Walter M. Miller's "Six and Ten are Johnny," Ray Bradbury's "The Smile," Arthur Clarke's "Encounter in the Dawn," and some of the earliest stories of the witty and astonishingly prolific Robert Sheckley.

And then—oh, I could go on and on—there were all the other new magazines, and old ones returning after a wartime hiatus, that came rushing into the burgeoning field: *Super Science Stories*, *Other Worlds*, *Fantastic Universe*, *Infinity*, *Future Science Fiction*, *Marvel Science*

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Stories, Space Science Fiction, Science Fiction Adventures, Imagination, Beyond, Science Fiction Plus—oh, lordy, lordy, there were dozens of them, good magazines and bad ones and occasionally really awful ones, and what a delight it was to run down to the newsstand every week and find some newcomer there! Ashley's wonderful book lists them all, in an appendix running nearly thirty pages—title, date, editor's name, everything. There had never been anything like it in the history of science fiction: at various times in 1953 there were thirty-nine different science fiction magazines on the newsstands!

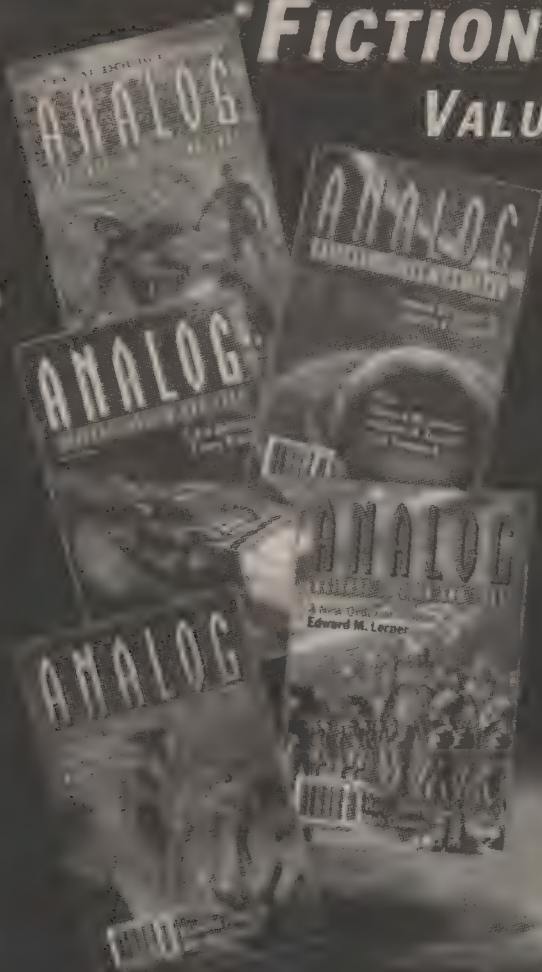
The interesting thing about that from my point of view, back then, is that the great science fiction boom of the 1950s created room for a host of new writers. Some of them were writers of talent, even of genius, like Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley, Philip José Farmer, Richard Matheson, Walter Miller, James Gunn, Gordon R. Dickson, Avram Davidson, Algis Budrys, and Frank Herbert, whose names

and work are still well known today. But, because even that many splendid writers weren't enough to fill all the pages of all those science fiction magazines, a few rank beginners barely old enough to vote—I'm thinking of three kids named Harlan Ellison, John Brunner, and Robert Silverberg—were able to poke their noses into the tent, too. We weren't the equals of Sheckley and Dick and Farmer and the rest as writers, at least not then, but we did manage to get a few stories published, and then some more, and then. . . .

It's a marvelous book. If you care even a little about the history of the science fiction magazines, or if you just want to read about a giddy and splendiferous era of turbulent science fictional creativity, hunt down Mike Ashley's *Transformations* and the earlier volume in his epic history, *The Time Machines*. The whole saga up to 1970 is there. The concluding book, *Gateways to Forever*, should be available before long, bringing the tale up to modern times. This reader can't wait. ○

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YELLOW CARD MAN

Paolo Bacigalupi

Paolo Bacigalupi recently won the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for his short story "The Calorie Man," and that same tale is, at this writing, a finalist for the 2006 Hugo Award. The author has a website at *windupstories.com*. He tells us the pitiless future of the "Yellow Card Man" was "an outgrowth from an aborted novel." In his latest story, *Tranh*, who began existence as one of the book's supporting characters, must use any means available to survive in this ruthless and precarious future.

Machetes gleam on the warehouse floor, reflecting a red conflagration of jute and tamarind and kink-springs. They're all around now. The men with their green headbands and their slogans and their wet wet blades. Their calls echo in the warehouse and on the street. Number one son is already gone. Jade Blossom he cannot find, no matter how many times he treads her phone number. His daughters' faces have been split wide like blister rust durians.

More fires blaze. Black smoke roils around him. He runs through his warehouse offices, past computers with teak cases and iron treadles and past piles of ash where his clerks burned files through the night, obliterating the names of people who aided the Tri-Clipper.

He runs, choking on heat and smoke. In his own gracious office he dashes to the shutters and fumbles with their brass catches. He slams his shoulder against those blue shutters while the warehouse burns and brown-skinned men boil through the door and swing their slick red knives . . .

Tranh wakes, gasping.

Sharp concrete edges jam against the knuckles of his spine. A salt-slick thigh smothers his face. He shoves away the stranger's leg. Sweat-sheened skin glimmers in the blackness, impressionistic markers for the

bodies that shift and shove all around him. They fart and groan and turn, flesh on flesh, bone against bone, the living and the heat-smothered dead all together.

A man coughs. Moist lungs and spittle gust against Tranh's face. His spine and belly stick to the naked sweating flesh of the strangers around him. Claustrophobia rises. He forces it down. Forces himself to lie still, to breathe slowly, deeply, despite the heat. To taste the sweltering darkness with all the paranoia of a survivor's mind. He is awake while others sleep. He is alive while others are long dead. He forces himself to lie still, and listen.

Bicycle bells are ringing. Down below and far away, ten thousand bodies below, a lifetime away, bicycle bells chime. He claws himself out of the mass of tangled humanity, dragging his hemp sack of possessions with him. He is late. Of all the days he could be late, this is the worst possible one. He slings the bag over a bony shoulder and feels his way down the stairs, finding his footing in the cascade of sleeping flesh. He slides his sandals between families, lovers, and crouching hungry ghosts, praying that he will not slip and break an old man's bone. Step, feel, step, feel.

A curse rises from the mass. Bodies shift and roll. He steadies himself on a landing amongst the privileged who lie flat, then wades on. Downward, ever downward, round more turnings of the stair, wading down through the carpet of his countrymen. Step. Feel. Step. Feel. Another turn. A hint of gray light glimmers far below. Fresh air kisses his face, caresses his body. The waterfall of anonymous flesh resolves into individuals, men and women sprawled across one another, pillowed on hard concrete, propped on the slant of the windowless stair. Gray light turns gold. The tinkle of bicycle bells comes louder now, clear like the ring of cibusco chimes.

Tranh spills out of the high-rise and into a crowd of congee sellers, hemp weavers, and potato carts. He puts his hands on his knees and gasps, sucking in swirling dust and trampled street dung, grateful for every breath as sweat pours off his body. Salt jewels fall from the tip of his nose, spatter the red paving stones of the sidewalk with his moisture. Heat kills men. Kills old men. But he is out of the oven; he has not been cooked again, despite the blast furnace of the dry season.

Bicycles and their ringing bells flow past like schools of carp, commuters already on their way to work. Behind him the high-rise looms, forty stories of heat and vines and mold. A vertical ruin of broken windows and pillaged apartments. A remnant glory from the old energy Expansion now become a heated tropic coffin without air conditioning or electricity to protect it from the glaze of the equatorial sun. Bangkok keeps its refugees in the pale blue sky, and wishes they would stay there. And yet he has emerged alive; despite the Dung Lord, despite the white shirts, despite old age, he has once again clawed his way down from the heavens.

Tranh straightens. Men stir woks of noodles and pull steamers of *baozi* from their bamboo rounds. Gray high-protein U-TeX rice gruel fills the air with the scents of rotting fish and fatty acid oils. Tranh's stomach knots with hunger and a pasty saliva coats his mouth, all that his dehydrated

body can summon at the scent of food. Devil cats swirl around the vendors' legs like sharks, hoping for morsels to drop, hoping for theft opportunities. Their shimmering chameleon-like forms flit and flicker, showing calico and Siamese and orange tabby markings before fading against the backdrop of concrete and crowding hungry people that they brush against. The woks burn hard and bright with green-tinged methane, giving off new scents as rice noodles splash into hot oil. Trinh forces himself to turn away.

He shoves through the press, dragging his hemp bag along with him, ignoring who it hits and who shouts after him. Incident victims crouch in the doorways, waving severed limbs and begging from others who have a little more. Men squat on tea stools and watch the day's swelter build as they smoke tiny rolled cigarettes of scavenged gold leaf tobacco and share them from lip to lip. Women converse in knots, nervously fingering yellow cards as they wait for white shirts to appear and stamp their renewals.

Yellow card people as far as the eye can see: an entire race of people, fled to the great Thai Kingdom from Malaya where they were suddenly unwelcome. A fat clot of refugees placed under the authority of the Environment Ministry's white shirts as if they were nothing but another invasive species to be managed, like cibiscosis, blister rust, and genehack weevil. Yellow cards, yellow men. *Huang ren* all around, and Trinh is late for his one opportunity to climb out of their mass. One opportunity in all his months as a yellow card Chinese refugee. And now he is late. He squeezes past a rat seller, swallowing another rush of saliva at the scent of roasted flesh, and rushes down an alley to the water pump. He stops short.

Ten others stand in line before him: old men, young women, mothers, boys.

He slumps. He wants to rage at the setback. If he had the energy—if he had eaten well yesterday or the day before or even the day before that he would scream, would throw his hemp bag on the street and stamp on it until it turned to dust—but his calories are too few. It is just another opportunity squandered, thanks to the ill luck of the stairwells. He should have given the last of his baht to the Dung Lord and rented body-space in an apartment with windows facing east so that he could see the rising sun, and wake early.

But he was cheap. Cheap with his money. Cheap with his future. How many times did he tell his sons that spending money to make more money was perfectly acceptable? But the timid yellow card refugee that he has become counseled him to save his baht. Like an ignorant peasant mouse he clutched his cash to himself and slept in pitch-black stairwells. He should have stood like a tiger and braved the night curfew and the ministry's white shirts and their black batons. . . . And now he is late and reeks of the stairwells and stands behind ten others, all of whom must drink and fill a bucket and brush their teeth with the brown water of the Chao Phraya River.

There was a time when he demanded punctuality of his employees, of his wife, of his sons and concubines, but it was when he owned a spring-wound wristwatch and could gaze at its steady sweep of minutes and

hours. Every so often, he could wind its tiny spring, and listen to it tick, and lash his sons for their lazy attitudes. He has become old and slow and stupid or he would have foreseen this. Just as he should have foreseen the rising militancy of the Green Headbands. When did his mind become so slack?

One by one, the other refugees finish their ablutions. A mother with gap teeth and blooms of gray *fa' gan* fringe behind her ears tops her bucket, and Tranh slips forward.

He has no bucket. Just the bag. The precious bag. He hangs it beside the pump and wraps his sarong more tightly around his hollow hips before he squats under the pump head. With a bony arm he yanks the pump's handle. Ripe brown water gushes over him. The river's blessing. His skin droops off his body with the weight of the water, sagging like the flesh of a shaved cat. He opens his mouth and drinks the gritty water, rubs his teeth with a finger, wondering what protozoa he may swallow. It doesn't matter. He trusts luck, now. It's all he has.

Children watch him bathe his old body while their mothers scavenge through PurCal mango peels and Red Star tamarind hulls hoping to find some bit of fruit not tainted with cibiscosis. 111mt.6. . . . Or is it 111mt.7? Or mt.8? There was a time when he knew all the bio-engineered plagues that ailed them. Knew when a crop was about to fail, and whether new seedstock had been ripped. Profited from the knowledge by filling his clipper ships with the right seeds and produce. But that was a lifetime ago.

His hands are shaking as he opens his bag and pulls out his clothes. Is it old age or excitement that makes him tremble? Clean clothes. Good clothes. A rich man's white linen suit.

The clothes were not his, but now they are, and he has kept them safe. Safe for this opportunity, even when he desperately wanted to sell them for cash or wear them as his other clothes turned to rags. He drags the trousers up his bony legs, stepping out of his sandals and balancing one foot at a time. He begins buttoning the shirt, hurrying his fingers as a voice in his head reminds him that time is slipping away.

"Selling those clothes? Going to parade them around until someone with meat on his bones buys them off you?"

Tranh glances up—he shouldn't need to look; he should know the voice—and yet he looks anyway. He can't help himself. Once he was a tiger. Now he is nothing but a frightened little mouse who jumps and twitches at every hint of danger. And there it is: Ma. Standing before him, beaming. Fat and beaming. As vital as a wolf.

Ma grins. "You look like a wire-frame mannequin at Palawan Plaza."

"I wouldn't know. I can't afford to shop there." Tranh keeps putting on his clothes.

"Those are nice enough to come from Palawan. How did you get them?"

Tranh doesn't answer.

"Who are you fooling? Those clothes were made for a man a thousand times your size."

"We can't all be fat and lucky." Tranh's voice comes out as a whisper. Did he always whisper? Was he always such a rattletrap corpse whispering and sighing at every threat? He doesn't think so. But it's hard for him

to remember what a tiger should sound like. He tries again, steadying his voice. "We can't all be as lucky as Ma Ping who lives on the top floors with the Dung King himself." His words still come out like reeds shushing against concrete.

"Lucky?" Ma laughs. So young. So pleased with himself. "I earn my fate. Isn't that what you always used to tell me? That luck has nothing to do with success? That men make their own luck?" He laughs again. "And now look at you."

Tranh grits his teeth. "Better men than you have fallen." Still the awful timid whisper.

"And better men than you are on the rise." Ma's fingers dart to his wrist. They stroke a wristwatch, a fine chronograph, ancient, gold and diamonds—Rolex. From an earlier time. A different place. A different world. Tranh stares stupidly, like a hypnotized snake. He can't tear his eyes away.

Ma smiles lazily. "You like it? I found it in an antique shop near Wat Rajapradit. It seemed familiar."

Tranh's anger rises. He starts to reply, then shakes his head and says nothing. Time is passing. He fumbles with his final buttons, pulls on the coat and runs his fingers through the last surviving strands of his lank gray hair. If he had a comb . . . He grimaces. It is stupid to wish. The clothes are enough. They have to be.

Ma laughs. "Now you look like a Big Name."

Ignore him, says the voice inside Tranh's head. Tranh pulls his last paltry baht out of his hemp bag—the money he saved by sleeping in the stairwells, and which has now made him so late—and shoves it into his pockets.

"You seem rushed. Do you have an appointment somewhere?"

Tranh shoves past, trying not to flinch as he squeezes around Ma's bulk.

Ma calls after him, laughing. "Where are you headed, Mr. Big Name? Mr. Three Prosperities! Do you have some intelligence you'd like to share with the rest of us?"

Others look up at the shout: hungry yellow card faces, hungry yellow card mouths. Yellow card people as far as the eye can see, and all of them looking at him now. Incident survivors. Men. Women. Children. Knowing him, now. Recognizing his legend. With a change of clothing and a single shout he has risen from obscurity. Their mocking calls pour down like a monsoon rain:

"Wei! Mr. Three Prosperities! Nice shirt!"

"Share a smoke, Mr. Big Name!"

"Where are you going so fast all dressed up?"

"Getting married?"

"Getting a tenth wife?"

"Got a job?"

"Mr. Big Name! Got a job for me?"

"Where you going? Maybe we should all follow Old Multinational!"

Tranh's neck prickles. He shakes off the fear. Even if they follow it will be too late for them to take advantage. For the first time in half a year,

the advantage of skills and knowledge are on his side. Now there is only time.

He jogs through Bangkok's morning press as bicycles and cycle rickshaws and spring-wound scooters stream past. Sweat drenches him. It soaks his good shirt, damps even his jacket. He takes it off and slings it over an arm. His gray hair clings to his egg-bald liver-spotted skull, waterlogged. He pauses every other block to walk and recover his breath as his shins begin to ache and his breath comes in gasps and his old man's heart hammers in his chest.

He should spend his baht on a cycle rickshaw but he can't make himself do it. He is late. But perhaps he is too late? And if he is too late, the extra baht will be wasted and he will starve tonight. But then, what good is a suit soaked with sweat?

Clothes make the man, he told his sons; the first impression is the most important. Start well, and you start ahead. Of course you can win someone with your skills and your knowledge but people are animals first. Look good. Smell good. Satisfy their first senses. Then when they are well disposed toward you, make your proposal.

Isn't that why he beat Second Son when he came home with a red tattoo of a tiger on his shoulder, as though he was some calorie gangster? Isn't that why he paid a tooth doctor to twist even his daughters' teeth with cultured bamboo and rubber curves from Singapore so that they were as straight as razors?

And isn't that why the Green Headbands in Malaya hated us Chinese? Because we looked so good? Because we looked so rich? Because we spoke so well and worked so hard when they were lazy and we sweated every day?

Tranh watches a pack of spring-wound scooters flit past, all of them Thai-Chinese manufactured. Such clever fast things—a megajoule kink-spring and a flywheel, pedals and friction brakes to regather kinetic energy. And all their factories owned 100 percent by Chiu Chow Chinese. And yet no Chiu Chow blood runs in the gutters of this country. These Chiu Chow Chinese are loved, despite the fact that they came to the Thai Kingdom as *farang*.

If we had assimilated in Malaya like the Chiu Chow did here, would we have survived?

Tranh shakes his head at the thought. It would have been impossible. His clan would have had to convert to Islam as well, and forsake all their ancestors in Hell. It would have been impossible. Perhaps it was his people's karma to be destroyed. To stand tall and dominate the cities of Penang and Malacca and all the western coast of the Malayan Peninsula for a brief while, and then to die.

Clothes make the man. Or kill him. Tranh understands this, finally. A white tailored suit from Hwang Brothers is nothing so much as a target. An antique piece of gold mechanization swinging on your wrist is nothing if not bait. Tranh wonders if his sons' perfect teeth still lie in the ashes of Three Prosperities' warehouses, if their lovely timepieces now attract sharks and crabs in the holds of his scuttled clipper ships.

He should have known. Should have seen the rising tide of bloodthirsty subjects and intensifying nationalism. Just as the man he followed two months ago should have known that fine clothes were no protection. A man in good clothes, a yellow card to boot, should have known that he was nothing but a bit of bloodied bait before a Komodo lizard. At least the stupid melon didn't bleed on his fancy clothes when the white shirts were done with him. That one had no habit of survival. He forgot that he was no longer a Big Name.

But Trinh is learning. As he once learned tides and depth charts, markets and bio-engineered plagues; profit maximization and how to balance the dragon's gate, he now learns from the devil cats who molt and fade from sight, who flee their hunters at the first sign of danger. He learns from the crows and kites who live so well on scavenge. These are the animals he must emulate. He must discard the reflexes of a tiger. There are no tigers except in zoos. A tiger is always hunted and killed. But a small animal, a scavenging animal, has a chance to strip the bones of a tiger and walk away with the last Hwang Brothers suit that will ever cross the border from Malaya. With the Hwang clan all dead and the Hwang patterns all burned, nothing is left except memories and antiques, and one scavenging old man who knows the power and the peril of good appearance.

An empty cycle rickshaw coasts past. The rickshaw man looks back at Trinh, eyes questioning, attracted by the Hwang Brothers fabrics that flap off Trinh's skinny frame. Trinh raises a tentative hand. The cycle rickshaw slows.

Is it a good risk? To spend his last security so frivolously?

There was the time when he sent clipper fleets across the ocean to Chennai with great stinking loads of durians because he guessed that the Indians had not had time to plant resistant crop strains before the new blister rust mutations swept over them. A time when he bought black tea and sandalwood from the river men on the chance that he could sell it in the South. Now he can't decide if he should ride or walk. What a pale man he has become! Sometimes he wonders if he is actually a hungry ghost, trapped between worlds and unable to escape one way or the other.

The cycle rickshaw coasts ahead, the rider's blue jersey shimmering in the tropic sun, waiting for a decision. Trinh waves him away. The rickshaw man stands on his pedals, sandals flapping against calloused heels, and accelerates.

Panic seizes Trinh. He raises his hand again, chases after the rickshaw. "Wait!" His voice comes out as a whisper.

The rickshaw slips into traffic, joining bicycles and the massive shambling shapes of elephantine megodonts. Trinh lets his hand fall, obscurely grateful that the rickshaw man hasn't heard, that the decision of spending his last baht has been made by some force larger than himself.

All around him, the morning press flows. Hundreds of children in their sailor suit uniforms stream through school gates. Saffron-robed monks stroll under the shade of wide black umbrellas. A man with a conical bamboo hat watches him and then mutters quietly to his friend. They both study him. A trickle of fear runs up Trinh's spine.

They are all around him, as they were in Malacca. In his own mind, he calls them foreigners, *farang*. And yet it is he who is the foreigner here. The creature that doesn't belong. And they know it. The women hanging sarongs on the wires of their balconies, the men sitting barefoot while they drink sugared coffee. The fish sellers and curry men. They all know it, and Tranh can barely control his terror.

Bangkok is not Malacca, he tells himself. Bangkok is not Penang. We have no wives, or gold wristwatches with diamonds, or clipper fleets to steal anymore. Ask the snakeheads who abandoned me in the leech jungles of the border. They have all my wealth. I have nothing. I am no tiger. I am safe.

For a few seconds he believes it. But then a teak-skinned boy chops the top off a coconut with a rusty machete and offers it to Tranh with a smile and it's all Tranh can do not to scream and run.

Bangkok is not Malacca. They will not burn your warehouses or slash your clerks into chunks of shark bait. He wipes sweat off his face. Perhaps he should have waited to wear the suit. It draws too much attention. There are too many people looking at him. Better to fade like a devil cat and slink across the city in safe anonymity, instead of strutting around like a peacock.

Slowly the streets change from palm-lined boulevards to the open wastelands of the new foreigners' quarter. Tranh hurries toward the river, heading deeper into the manufacturing empire of white *farang*.

Gweilo, *yang guizi*, *farang*. So many words in so many languages for these translucent-skinned sweating monkeys. Two generations ago when the petroleum ran out and the *gweilo* factories shut down, everyone assumed they were gone for good. And now they are back. The monsters of the past returned, with new toys and new technologies. The nightmares his mother threatened him with, invading Asiatic coasts. Demons truly; never dead.

And he goes to worship them: the ilk of AgriGen and PurCal with their monopolies on U-TeX rice and Total Nutrient Wheat; the blood-brothers of the bio-engineers who generipped devil cats from storybook inspiration and set them loose in the world to breed and breed and breed; the sponsors of the Intellectual Property Police who used to board his clipper fleets in search of IP infringements, hunting like wolves for unstamped calories and gene-ripped grains as though their engineered plagues of cibiscosis and blister rust weren't enough to keep their profits high. . . .

Ahead of him, a crowd has formed. Tranh frowns. He starts to run, then forces himself back to a walk. Better not to waste his calories, now. A line has already formed in front of the foreign devil Tennyson Brothers' factory. It stretches almost a *li*, snaking around the corner, past the bicycle gear logo in the wrought iron gate of Sukhumvit Research Corporation, past the intertwined dragons of PurCal East Asia, and past Mishimoto & Co., the clever Japanese fluid dynamics company that Tranh once sourced his clipper designs from.

Mishimoto is full of windup import workers, they say. Full of illegal gene-ripped bodies that walk and talk and totter about in their herky-jerky way—and take rice from real men's bowls. Creatures with as many

as eight arms like the Hindu gods, creatures with no legs so they cannot run away, creatures with eyes as large as teacups that can only see a bare few feet ahead of them but inspect everything with enormous magnified curiosity. But no one can see inside, and if the Environment Ministry's white shirts know, then the clever Japanese are paying them well to ignore their crimes against biology and religion. It is perhaps the only thing a good Buddhist and a good Muslim and even the *farang* Grahamite Christians can agree on: windups have no souls.

When Tranh bought Mishimoto's clipper ships so long ago, he didn't care. Now he wonders if behind their high gates, windup monstrosities labor while yellow cards stand outside and beg.

Tranh trudges down the line. Policemen with clubs and spring guns patrol the hopefuls, making jokes about *farang* who wish to work for *farang*. Heat beats down, merciless on the men lined up before the gate.

"Wah! You look like a pretty bird with those clothes."

Tranh starts. Li Shen and Hu Laoshi and Lao Xia stand in the line, clustered together. A trio of old men as pathetic as himself. Hu waves a newly rolled cigarette in invitation, motioning him to join them. Tranh nearly shakes at the sight of the tobacco, but forces himself to refuse it. Three times Hu offers, and finally Tranh allows himself to accept, grateful that Hu is in earnest, and wondering where Hu has found this sudden wealth. But then, Hu has a little more strength than the rest of them. A cart man earns more if he works as fast as Hu.

Tranh wipes the sweat off his brow. "A lot of applicants."

They all laugh at Tranh's dismay.

Hu lights the cigarette for Tranh. "You thought you knew a secret, maybe?"

Tranh shrugs and draws deeply, passes the cigarette to Lao Xia. "A rumor. Potato God said his elder brother's son had a promotion. I thought there might be a niche down below, in the slot the nephew left behind."

Hu grins. "That's where I heard it, too. 'Eee. He'll be rich. Manage fifteen clerks. Eee! He'll be rich.' I thought I might be one of the fifteen."

"At least the rumor was true," Lao Xia says. "And not just Potato God's nephew promoted, either." He scratches the back of his head, a convulsive movement like a dog fighting fleas. *Fa' gan's* gray fringe stains the crooks of his elbows and peeps from the sweaty pockets behind his ears where his hair has receded. He sometimes jokes about it: nothing a little money can't fix. A good joke. But today he is scratching and the skin behind his ears is cracked and raw. He notices everyone watching and yanks his hand down. He grimaces and passes the cigarette to Li Shen.

"How many positions?" Tranh asks.

"Three. Three clerks."

Tranh grimaces. "My lucky number."

Li Shen peers down the line with his bottle-thick glasses. "Too many of us, I think, even if your lucky number is 555."

Lao Xia laughs. "Amongst the four of us, there are already too many." He taps the man standing in line just ahead of them. "Uncle. What was your profession before?"

The stranger looks back, surprised. He was a distinguished gentleman,

once, by his scholar's collar, by his fine leather shoes now scarred and blackened with scavenged charcoal. "I taught physics."

Lao Xia nods. "You see? We're all overqualified. I oversaw a rubber plantation. Our own professor has degrees in fluid dynamics and materials design. Hu was a fine doctor. And then there is our friend of the Three Prosperities. Not a trading company at all. More like a multi-national." He tastes the words. Says them again, "Multi-national." A strange, powerful, seductive sound.

Tranh ducks his head, embarrassed. "You're too kind."

"*Fang pi.*" Hu takes a drag on his cigarette, keeps it moving. "You were the richest of us all. And now here we are, old men scrambling for young men's jobs. Every one of us ten thousand times overqualified."

The man behind them interjects, "I was executive legal counsel for Standard & Commerce."

Lao Xia makes a face. "Who cares, dog fucker? You're nothing now."

The banking lawyer turns away, affronted. Lao Xia grins, sucks hard on the hand-rolled cigarette and passes it again to Tranh. Hu nudges Tranh's elbow as he starts to take a puff. "Look! There goes old Ma."

Tranh looks over, exhales smoke sharply. For a moment he thinks Ma has followed him, but no. It is just coincidence. They are in the *farang* factory district. Ma works for the foreign devils, balancing their books. A kink-spring company. Springlife. Yes, Springlife. It is natural that Ma should be here, comfortably riding to work behind a sweating cycle-rickshaw man.

"Ma Ping," Li Shen says. "I heard he's living on the top floor now. Up there with the Dung Lord himself."

Tranh scowls. "I fired him, once. Ten thousand years ago. Lazy and an embezzler."

"He's so fat."

"I've seen his wife," Hu says. "And his sons. They both have fat on them. They eat meat every night. The boys are fatter than fat. Full of U-TeX proteins."

"You're exaggerating."

"Fatter than us."

Lao Xia scratches a rib. "Bamboo is fatter than you."

Tranh watches Ma Ping open a factory door and slip inside. The past is past. Dwelling on the past is madness. There is nothing for him there. There are no wristwatches, no concubines, no opium pipes or jade sculptures of Quan Yin's merciful form. There are no pretty clipper ships slicing into port with fortunes in their holds. He shakes his head and offers the nearly spent cigarette to Hu so that he can recover the last tobacco for later use. There is nothing for him in the past. Ma is in the past. Three Prosperities Trading Company is the past. The sooner he remembers this, the sooner he will climb out of this awful hole.

From behind him, a man calls out, "Wei! Baldy! When did you cut the line? Go to the back! You line up, like the rest of us!"

"Line up?" Lao Xia shouts back. "Don't be stupid!" He waves at the line ahead. "How many hundreds are ahead of us? It won't make any difference where he stands."

Others begin to attend the man's complaint. Complain as well. "Line up! *Pai dui! Pai dui!*" The disturbance increases and police start down the line, casually swinging their batons. They aren't white shirts, but they have no love for hungry yellow cards.

Tranh makes placating motions to the crowd and Lao Xia. "Of course. Of course. I'll line up. It's of no consequence." He makes his farewells and plods his way down the winding yellow card snake, seeking its distant tail.

Everyone is dismissed long before he reaches it.

A scavenging night. A starving night. Tranh hunts through dark alleys, avoiding the vertical prison heat of the towers. Devil cats seethe and scatter ahead of him in rippling waves. The lights of the methane lamps flicker, burn low and snuff themselves, blackening the city. Hot velvet darkness fetid with rotting fruit swaddles him. The heavy humid air sags. Still sweltering darkness. Empty market stalls. On a street corner, theater men turn in stylized cadences to stories of Ravana. On a thoroughfare, swingshift megodonts shuffle homeward like gray mountains, their massed shadows led by the gold trim glitter of union handlers.

In the alleys, children with bright silver knives hunt unwary yellow cards and drunken Thais, but Tranh is wise to their feral ways. A year ago, he would not have seen them, but he has the paranoid's gift of survival now. Creatures like them are no worse than sharks: easy to predict, easy to avoid. It is not these obviously feral hunters who churn Tranh's guts with fear, it is the chameleons, the everyday people who work and shop and smile and *wai* so pleasantly—and riot without warning—who terrify Tranh.

He picks through the trash heaps, fighting devil cats for signs of food, wishing he was fast enough to catch and kill one of those nearly invisible felines. Picking up discarded mangos, studying them carefully with his old man's eyes, holding them close and then far away, sniffing at them, feeling their blister rusted exteriors and then tossing them aside when they show red mottle in their guts. Some of them still smell good, but even crows won't accept such a taint. They would eagerly peck apart a bloated corpse, but they will not feed on blister rust.

Down the street, the Dung Lord's lackeys shovel the day's animal leavings into sacks and throw them into tricycle carriers: the night harvest. They watch him suspiciously. Tranh keeps his eyes averted, avoiding challenge, and scuffles on. He has nothing to cook on an illegally stolen shit fire anyway, and nowhere to sell manure on the black market. The Dung Lord's monopoly is too strong. Tranh wonders how it might be to find a place in the dung shovelers' union, to know that his survival was guaranteed feeding the composters of Bangkok's methane reclamation plants. But it is an opium dream; no yellow card can slither into that closed club.

Tranh lifts another mango and freezes. He bends low, squinting. Pushes aside broadsheet complaints against the Ministry of Trade and handbills calling for a new gold-sheathed River Wat. He pushes aside black slime banana peels and burrows into the garbage. Below it all, stained

and torn but still legible, he finds a portion of what was once a great advertising board that perhaps stood over this marketplace:—*ogistics. Shipping. Tradin*—and behind the words, the glorious silhouette of Dawn Star: one part of Three Prosperities' tri-clipper logo, running before the wind as fast and sleek as a shark: a high-tech image of palm-oil spun polymers and sails as sharp and white as a gull's.

Tranh turns his face away, overcome. It's like unearthing a grave and finding himself within. His pride. His blindness. From a time when he thought he might compete with the foreign devils and become a shipping magnate. A Li Ka Shing or a reborn Richard Kuok for the New Expansion. Rebuild the pride of Nanyang Chinese shipping and trading. And here, like a slap in the face, a portion of his ego, buried in rot and blister rust and devil cat urine.

He searches around, pawing for more portions of the sign, wondering if anyone treads a phone call to that old phone number, if the secretary whose wages he once paid is still at his desk, working for a new master, a native Malay perhaps, with impeccable pedigree and religion. Wondering if the few clippers he failed to scuttle still ply the seas and islands of the archipelago. He forces himself to stop his search. Even if he had the money he would not treadle that number. Would not waste the calories. Could not stand the loss again.

He straightens, scattering devil cats who have slunk close. There is nothing here in this market except rinds and unshoveled dung. He has wasted his calories once again. Even the cockroaches and the blood beetles have been eaten. If he searches for a dozen hours, he will still find nothing. Too many people have come before, picking at these bones.

Three times he hides from white shirts as he makes his way home, three times ducking into shadows as they strut past. Cringing as they wander close, cursing his white linen suit that shows so clearly in darkness. By the third time, superstitious fear runs hot in his veins. His rich man's clothes seem to attract the patrols of the Environment Ministry, seem to hunger for the wearer's death. Black batons twirl from casual hands no more than inches away from his face. Spring guns glitter silver in the darkness. His hunters stand so close that he can count the wicked bladed disk cartridges in their jute bandoliers. A white shirt pauses and pisses in the alley where Tranh crouches, and only fails to see him because his partner stands on the street and wants to check the permits of the dung gatherers.

Each time, Tranh stifles his panicked urge to tear off his too-rich clothes and sink into safe anonymity. It is only a matter of time before the white shirts catch him. Before they swing their black clubs and make his Chinese skull a mash of blood and bone. Better to run naked through the hot night than strut like a peacock and die. And yet he cannot quite abandon the cursed suit. Is it pride? Is it stupidity? He keeps it though, even as its arrogant cut turns his bowels watery with fear.

By the time he reaches home, even the gas lights on the main thoroughfares of Sukhumvit Road and Rama IV are blackened. Outside the Dung Lord's tower, street stalls still burn woks for the few laborers lucky

enough to have night work and curfew dispensations. Pork tallow candles flicker on the tables. Noodles splash into hot woks with a sizzle. White shirts stroll past, their eyes on the seated yellow cards, ensuring that none of the foreigners brazenly sleep in the open air and sully the sidewalks with their snoring presence.

Tranh joins the protective loom of the towers, entering the nearly extra-territorial safety of the Dung Lord's influence. He stumbles toward the doorways and the swelter of the high rise, wondering how high he will be forced to climb before he can shove a niche for himself on the stairwells.

"You didn't get the job, did you?"

Tranh cringes at the voice. It's Ma Ping again, sitting at a sidewalk table, a bottle of Mekong whiskey beside his hand. His face is flushed with alcohol, as bright as a red paper lantern. Half-eaten plates of food lie strewn around his table. Enough to feed five others, easily.

Images of Ma war in Tranh's head: the young clerk he once sent packing for being too clever with an abacus, the man whose son is fat, the man who got out early, the man who begged to be rehired at Three Prosperities, the man who now struts around Bangkok with Tranh's last precious possession on his wrist—the one item that even the snakeheads didn't steal. Tranh thinks that truly fate is cruel, placing him in such proximity to one he once considered so far beneath him.

Despite his intention to show bravado, once again Tranh's words come out as a mousy whisper. "What do you care?"

Ma shrugs, pours whiskey for himself. "I wouldn't have noticed you in the line, without that suit." He nods at Tranh's sweat-damp clothing. "Good idea to dress up. Too far back in line, though."

Tranh wants to walk away, to ignore the arrogant whelp, but Ma's leavings of steamed bass and *laap* and U-TeX rice noodles lie tantalizingly close. He thinks he smells pork and can't help salivating. His gums ache for the idea that he could chew meat again and he wonders if his teeth would accept the awful luxury. . . .

Abruptly, Tranh realizes that he has been staring. That he has stood for some time, ogling the scraps of Ma's meal. And Ma is watching him. Tranh flushes and starts to turn away.

Ma says, "I didn't buy your watch to spite you, you know."

Tranh stops short. "Why then?"

Ma's fingers stray to the gold and diamond bauble, then seem to catch themselves. He reaches for his whiskey glass instead. "I wanted a reminder." He takes a swallow of liquor and sets the glass back amongst his piled plates with the deliberate care of a drunk. He grins sheepishly. His fingers are again stroking the watch, a guilty furtive movement. "I wanted a reminder. Against ego."

Tranh spits. "*Fang pi*."

Ma shakes his head vigorously. "No! It's true." He pauses. "Anyone can fall. If the Three Prosperities can fall, then I can. I wanted to remember that." He takes another pull on his whiskey. "You were right to fire me."

Tranh snorts. "You didn't think so then."

"I was angry. I didn't know that you'd saved my life, then." He shrugs. "I

would never have left Malaya if you hadn't fired me. I would never have seen the Incident coming. I would have had too much invested in staying." Abruptly, he pulls himself upright and motions for Tranh to join him. "Come. Have a drink. Have some food. I owe you that much. You saved my life. I've repaid you poorly. Sit."

Tranh turns away. "I don't despise myself so much."

"Do you love face so much that you can't take a man's food? Don't be stuck in your bones. I don't care if you hate me. Just take my food. Curse me later, when your belly is full."

Tranh tries to control his hunger, to force himself to walk away, but he can't. He knows men who might have enough face to starve before accepting Ma's scraps, but he isn't one of them. A lifetime ago, he might have been. But the humiliations of his new life have taught him much about who he really is. He has no sweet illusions now. He sits. Ma beams and pushes his half-eaten dishes across the table.

Tranh thinks he must have done something grave in a former life to merit this humiliation, but still he has to fight the urge to bury his hands in the oily food and eat with bare fingers. Finally, the owner of the sidewalk stall brings a pair of chopsticks for the noodles, and fork and spoon for the rest. Noodles and ground pork slide down his throat. He tries to chew but as soon as the food touches his tongue he gulps it down. More food follows. He lifts a plate to his lips, shoveling down the last of Ma's leavings. Fish and lank coriander and hot thick oil slip down like blessings.

"Good. Good." Ma waves at the night stall man and a whiskey glass is quickly rinsed and handed to him.

The sharp scent of liquor floats around Ma like an aura as he pours. Tranh's chest tightens at the scent. Oil coats his chin where he has made a mess in his haste. He wipes his mouth against his arm, watching the amber liquid splash into the glass.

Tranh once drank Cognac: XO. Imported by his own clippers. Fabulously expensive stuff with its shipping costs. A flavor of the foreign devils from before the Contraction. A ghost from utopian history, reinvigorated by the new Expansion and his own realization that the world was once again growing smaller. With new hull designs and polymer advances, his clipper ships navigated the globe and returned with the stuff of legends. And his Malay buyers were happy to purchase it, whatever their religion. What a profit that had been. He forces down the thought as Ma shoves the glass across to Tranh and then raises his own in toast. It is in the past. It is all in the past.

They drink. The whiskey burns warm in Tranh's belly, joining the chilis and fish and pork and the hot oil of the fried noodles.

"It really is too bad you didn't get that job."

Tranh grimaces. "Don't gloat. Fate has a way of balancing itself. I've learned that."

Ma waves a hand. "I don't gloat. There are too many of us, that's the truth. You were ten thousand times qualified for that job. For any job." He takes a sip of his whiskey, peers over its rim at Tranh. "Do you remember when you called me a lazy cockroach?"

Tranh shrugs; he can't take his eyes off the whiskey bottle. "I called you worse than that." He waits to see if Ma will refill his cup again. Wondering how rich he is, and how far this largesse will go. Hating that he plays beggar to a boy he once refused to keep as a clerk, and who now lords over him . . . and who now, in a show of face, pours Tranh's whiskey to the top, letting it spill over in an amber cascade under the flickering light of the candles.

Ma finishes pouring, stares at the puddle he has created. "Truly the world is turned upside down. The young lord over the old. The Malays pinch out the Chinese. And the foreign devils return to our shores like bloated fish after a *ku-shui* epidemic." Ma smiles. "You need to keep your ears up, and be aware of opportunities. Not like all those old men out on the sidewalk, waiting for hard labor. Find a new niche. That's what I did. That's why I've got my job."

Tranh grimaces. "You came at a more fortuitous time." He rallies, emboldened by a full belly and the liquor warming his face and limbs. "Anyway, you shouldn't be too proud. You still stink of mother's milk as far as I'm concerned, living in the Dung Lord's tower. You're only the Lord of Yellow Cards. And what is that, really? You haven't climbed as high as my ankles yet, Mr. Big Name."

Ma's eyes widen. He laughs. "No. Of course not. Someday, maybe. But I am trying to learn from you." He smiles slightly and nods at Tranh's decrepit state. "Everything except this postscript."

"Is it true there are crank fans on the top floors? That it's cool up there?"

Ma glances up at the looming high-rise. "Yes. Of course. And men with the calories to wind them as well. And they haul water up for us, and men act as ballast on the elevator—up and down all day—doing favors for the Dung Lord." He laughs and pours more whiskey, motions Tranh to drink. "You're right though. It's nothing, really. A poor palace, truly."

"But it doesn't matter now. My family moves tomorrow. We have our residence permits. Tomorrow when I get paid again, we're moving out. No more yellow card for us. No more payoffs to the Dung Lord's lackeys. No more problems with the white shirts. It's all set with the Environment Ministry. We turn in our yellow cards and become Thai. We're going to be immigrants. Not just some invasive species anymore." He raises his glass. "It's why I'm celebrating."

Tranh scowls. "You must be pleased." He finishes his drink, sets the tumbler down with a thud. "Just don't forget that the nail that stands up also gets pounded down."

Ma shakes his head and grins, his eyes whiskey bright. "Bangkok isn't Malacca."

"And Malacca wasn't Bali. And then they came with their machetes and their spring guns and they stacked our heads in the gutters and sent our bodies and blood down the river to Singapore."

Ma shrugs. "It's in the past." He waves to the man at the wok, calling for more food. "We have to make a home here, now."

"You think you can? You think some white shirt won't nail your hide to his door? You can't make them like us. Our luck's against us, here."

"Luck? When did Mr. Three Prosperities get so superstitious?"

Ma's dish arrives, tiny crabs crisp-fried, salted, and hot with oil for Ma and Tranh to pick at with chopsticks and crunch between their teeth, each one no bigger than the tip of Tranh's pinkie. Ma plucks one out and crunches it down. "When did Mr. Three Prosperities get so weak? When you fired me, you said I made my own luck. And now you tell me you don't have any?" He spits on the sidewalk. "I've seen windups with more will to survive than you."

"*Fang pi.*"

"No! It's true! There's a Japanese windup girl in the bars where my boss goes." Ma leans forward. "She looks like a real woman. And she does disgusting things." He grins. "Makes your cock hard. But you don't hear her complaining about luck. Every white shirt in the city would pay to dump her in the methane composters and she's still up in her high-rise, dancing every night, in front of everyone. Her whole soulless body on display."

"It's not possible."

Ma shrugs. "Say so if you like. But I've seen her. And she isn't starving. She takes whatever spit and money come her way, and she survives. It doesn't matter about the white shirts or the Kingdom edicts or the Japan-haters or the religious fanatics; she's been dancing for months."

"How can she survive?"

"Bribes? Maybe some ugly *farang* who wallows in her filth? Who knows? No real girl would do what she does. It makes your heart stop. You forget she's a windup, when she does those things." He laughs, then glances at Tranh. "Don't talk to me about luck. There's not enough luck in the entire Kingdom to keep her alive this long. And we know it's not karma that keeps her alive. She has none."

Tranh shrugs noncommittally and shovels more crabs into his mouth.

Ma grins. "You know I'm right." He drains his whiskey glass and slams it down on the table. "We make our own luck! Our own fate. There's a windup in a public bar and I have a job with a rich *farang* who can't find his ass without my help! Of course I'm right!" He pours more whiskey. "Get over your self-pity, and climb out of your hole. The foreign devils don't worry about luck or fate, and look how they return to us, like a newly engineered virus! Even the Contraction didn't stop them. They're like another invasion of devil cats. But they make their own luck. I'm not even sure if karma exists for them. And if fools like these *farang* can succeed, than we Chinese can't be kept down for long. Men make their own luck, that's what you told me when you fired me. You said I'd made my own bad luck and only had myself to blame."

Tranh looks up at Ma. "Maybe I could work at your company." He grins, trying not to look desperate. "I could make money for your lazy boss."

Ma's eyes become hooded. "Ah. That's difficult. Difficult to say."

Tranh knows that he should take the polite rejection, that he should shut up. But even as a part of him cringes, his mouth opens again, pressing, pleading. "Maybe you need an assistant? To keep the books? I speak their devil language. I taught it to myself when I traded with them. I could be useful."

"There is little enough work for me."

"But if he is as stupid as you say—"

"Stupid, yes. But not such a stupid melon that he wouldn't notice another body in his office. Our desks are just so far apart." He makes a motion with his hands. "You think he would not notice some stick coolie man squatting besides his computer treadle?"

"In his factory, then?"

But Ma is already shaking his head. "I would help you if I could. But the megadont unions control the power, and the line inspector unions are closed to *farang*, no offense, and no one will accept that you are a materials scientist." He shakes his head. "No. There is no way."

"Any job. As a dung shoveler, even."

But Ma is shaking his head more vigorously now, and Tranh finally manages to control his tongue, to plug this diarrhea of begging. "Never mind. Never mind." He forces a grin. "I'm sure some work will turn up. I'm not worried." He takes the bottle of Mekong whiskey and refills Ma's glass, upending the bottle and finishing the whiskey despite Ma's protests.

Tranh raises his half-empty glass and toasts the young man who has bested him in all ways before throwing back the last of the alcohol in one swift swallow. Under the table, nearly invisible devil cats brush against his bony legs, waiting for him to leave, hoping that he will be foolish enough to leave scraps.

Morning dawns. Tranh wanders the streets, hunting for a breakfast he cannot afford. He threads through market alleys redolent with fish and lank green coriander and bright flares of lemongrass. Durians lie in reeking piles, their spiky skins covered with red blister rust boils. He wonders if he can steal one. Their yellow surfaces are blotched and stained, but their guts are nutritious. He wonders how much blister rust a man can consume before falling into a coma.

"You want? Special deal. Five for five baht. Good, yes?"

The woman who screeches at him has no teeth, she smiles with her gums and repeats herself. "Five for five baht." She speaks Mandarin to him, recognizing him for their common heritage though she had the luck to be born in the Kingdom and he had the misfortune to be set down in Malaya. Chiu Chow Chinese, blessedly protected by her clan and King. Tranh suppresses envy.

"More like four for four." He makes a pun of the homonyms. *Sz* for *sz*. Four for death. "They've got blister rust."

She waves a hand sourly. "Five for five. They're still good. Better than good. Picked just before." She wields a gleaming machete and chops the durian in half, revealing the clean yellow slime of its interior with its fat gleaming pits. The sickly sweet scent of fresh durian boils up and envelops them. "See! Inside good. Picked just in time. Still safe."

"I might buy one." He can't afford any. But he can't help replying. It feels too good to be seen as a buyer. It is his suit, he realizes. The Hwang Brothers have raised him in this woman's eyes. She wouldn't have spoken if not for the suit. Wouldn't have even started the conversation.

"Buy more! The more you buy, the more you save."

He forces a grin, wondering how to get away from the bargaining he should never have started. "I'm only one old man. I don't need so much."

"One skinny old man. Eat more. Get fat!"

She says this and they both laugh. He searches for a response, something to keep their comradely interaction alive, but his tongue fails him. She sees the helplessness in his eyes. She shakes her head. "Ah, grandfather. It is hard times for everyone. Too many of you all at once. No one thought it would get so bad down there."

Tranh ducks his head, embarrassed. "I've troubled you. I should go."

"Wait. Here." She offers him the durian half. "Take it."

"I can't afford it."

She makes an impatient gesture. "Take it. It's lucky for me to help someone from the old country." She grins. "And the blister rust looks too bad to sell to anyone else."

"You're kind. Buddha smile on you." But as he takes her gift he again notices the great durian pile behind her. All neatly stacked with their blotches and their bloody wheals of blister rust. Just like stacked Chinese heads in Malacca: his wife and daughters staring out at him, accusatory. He drops the durian and kicks it away, frantically scraping his hands on his jacket, trying to get the blood off his palms.

"Ai! You'll waste it!"

Tranh barely hears the woman's cry. He staggers back from the fallen durian, staring at its ragged surface. Its gut-spilled interior. He looks around wildly. He has to get out of the crowds. Has to get away from the jostling bodies and the durian reek that's all around, thick in his throat, gagging him. He puts a hand to his mouth and runs, clawing at the other shoppers, fighting through their press.

"Where you go? Come back! *Huilai!*" But the woman's words are quickly drowned. Tranh shoves through the throng, pushing aside women with shopping baskets full of white lotus root and purple eggplants, dodging farmers and their clattering bamboo hand carts, twisting past tubs of squid and serpent head fish. He pelts down the market alley like a thief identified, scrambling and dodging, running without thought or knowledge of where he is going, but running anyway, desperate to escape the stacked heads of his family and countrymen.

He runs and runs.

And bursts into the open thoroughfare of Charoen Krung Road. Powdered dung dust and hot sunlight wash over him. Cycle rickshaws clatter past. Palms and squat banana trees shimmer green in the bright open air.

As quickly as it seized him, Tranh's panic fades. He stops short, hands on his knees, catching his breath and cursing himself. *Fool. Fool. If you don't eat, you die.* He straightens and tries to turn back but the stacked durians flash in his mind and he stumbles away from the alley, gagging again. He can't go back. Can't face those bloody piles. He doubles over and his stomach heaves but his empty guts bring up nothing but strings of drool.

Finally he wipes his mouth on a Hwang Brothers sleeve and forces himself to straighten and confront the foreign faces all around. The sea of for-

eigners that he must learn to swim amongst, and who all call him *farang*. It repels him to think of it. And to think that in Malacca, with twenty generations of family and clan well rooted in that city, he was just as much an interloper. That his clan's esteemed history is nothing but a footnote for a Chinese expansion that has proven as transient as nighttime cool. That his people were nothing but an accidental spillage of rice on a map, now wiped up much more carefully than they were scattered down.

Tranh unloads U-TeX Brand RedSilks deep into the night, offerings to Potato God. A lucky job. A lucky moment, even if his knees have become loose and wobbly and feel as if they must soon give way. A lucky job, even if his arms are shaking from catching the heavy sacks as they come down off the megodonts. Tonight, he reaps not just pay but also the opportunity to steal from the harvest. Even if the RedSilk potatoes are small and harvested early to avoid a new sweep of scabis mold—the fourth genetic variation this year—they are still good. And their small size means their enhanced nutrition falls easily into his pockets.

Hu crouches above him, lowering down the potatoes. As the massive elephantine megodonts shuffle and grunt, waiting for their great wagons to be unloaded, Tranh catches Hu's offerings with his hand hooks and lowers the sacks the last step to the ground. Hook, catch, swing, and lower. Again and again and again.

He is not alone in his work. Women from the tower slums crowd around his ladder. They reach up and caress each sack as he lowers it to the ground. Their fingers quest along hemp and burlap, testing for holes, for slight tears, for lucky gifts. A thousand times they stroke his burdens, reverently following the seams, only drawing away when coolie men shove between them to heft the sacks and haul them to Potato God.

After the first hour of his work, Tranh's arms are shaking. After three, he can barely stand. He teeters on his creaking ladder as he lowers each new sack, and gasps and shakes his head to clear sweat from his eyes as he waits for the next one to come down.

Hu peers down from above. "Are you all right?"

Tranh glances warily over his shoulder. Potato God is watching, counting the sacks as they are carried into the warehouse. His eyes occasionally flick up to the wagons and trace across Tranh. Beyond him, fifty unlucky men watch silently from the shadows, any one of them far more observant than Potato God can ever be. Tranh straightens and reaches up to accept the next sack, trying not to think about the watching eyes. How politely they wait. How silent. How hungry. "I'm fine. Just fine."

Hu shrugs and pushes the next burlap load over the wagon's lip. Hu has the better place, but Tranh cannot resent it. One or the other must suffer. And Hu found the job. Hu has the right to the best place. To rest a moment before the next sack moves. After all, Hu collected Tranh for the job when he should have starved tonight. It is fair.

Tranh takes the sack and lowers it into the forest of waiting women's hands, releases his hooks with a twist, and drops the bag to the ground. His joints feel loose and rubbery, as if femur and tibia will skid apart at any moment. He is dizzy with heat, but he dares not ask to slow the pace.

Another potato sack comes down. Women's hands rise up like tangling strands of seaweed, touching, prodding, hungering. He cannot force them back. Even if he shouts at them they return. They are like devil cats; they cannot help themselves. He drops the sack the last few feet to the ground and reaches up for another as it comes over the wagon's lip.

As he hooks the sack, his ladder creaks and suddenly slides. It chatters down the side of the wagon, then catches abruptly. Tranh sways, juggling the potato sack, trying to regain his center of gravity. Hands are all around him, tugging at the bag, pulling, prodding. "Watch out—"

The ladder skids again. He drops like a stone. Women scatter as he plunges. He hits the ground and pain explodes in his knee. The potato sack bursts. For a moment he worries what Potato God will say but then he hears screams all around him. He rolls onto his back. Above him, the wagon is swaying, shuddering. People are shouting and fleeing. The megodont lunges forward and the wagon heaves. Bamboo ladders fall like rain, slapping the pavement with bright firecracker retorts. The beast reverses itself and the wagon skids past Tranh, grinding the ladders to splinters. It is impossibly fast, even with the wagon's weight still hampering it. The megodont's great maw opens and suddenly it is screaming, a sound as high and panicked as a human's.

All around them, other megodonts respond in a chorus. Their cacophony swamps the street. The megodont surges onto its hind legs, an explosion of muscle and velocity that breaks the wagon's traces and flips it like a toy. Men cartwheel from it, blossoms shaken from a cherry tree. Madened, the beast rears again and kicks the wagon. Sends it skidding sideways. It slams past Tranh, missing him by inches.

Tranh tries to rise but his leg won't work. The wagon smashes into a wall. Bamboo and teak crackle and explode, the wagon disintegrating as the megodont drags and kicks it, trying to win free completely. Tranh drags himself away from the flying wagon, hand over hand, hauling his useless leg behind him. All around, men are shouting instructions, trying to control the beast, but he doesn't look back. He focuses on the cobbles ahead, on getting out of reach. His leg won't work. It refuses him. It seems to hate him.

Finally he makes it into the shelter of a protective wall. He hauls himself upright. "I'm fine," he tells himself. "Fine." Gingerly he tests his leg, setting weight on it. It's wobbly, but he feels no real pain, not now. "*Mei wenti. Mei wenti,*" he whispers. "Not a problem. Just cracked it. Not a problem."

The men are still shouting and the megodont is still screaming, but all he can see is his brittle old knee. He lets go of the wall. Takes a step, testing his weight, and collapses like a shadow puppet with strings gone slack.

Gritting his teeth, he again hauls himself up off the cobbles. He props himself against the wall, massaging his knee and watching the bedlam. Men are throwing ropes over the back of the struggling megodont, pulling it down, immobilizing it, finally. More than a score of men are working to hobble it.

The wagon's frame has shattered completely and potatoes are spilled

everywhere. A thick mash coats the ground. Women scramble on their knees, clawing through the mess, fighting with one another to hoard pulped tubers. They scrape it up from the street. Some of their scavenger is stained red, but no one seems to care. Their squabbling continues. The red bloom spreads. At the blossom's center, a man's trousers protrude from the muck.

Tranh frowns. He drags himself upright again and hops on his one good leg toward the broken wagon. He catches up against its shattered frame, staring. Hu's body is a savage ruin, awash in megodont dung and potato mash. And now that Tranh is close, he can see that the struggling megodont's great gray feet are gory with his friend. Someone is calling for a doctor but it is half-hearted, a habit from a time when they were not yellow cards.

Tranh tests his weight again but his knee provides the same queer jointless failure. He catches up against the wagon's splintered planking and hauls himself back upright. He works the leg, trying to understand why it collapses. The knee bends, it doesn't even hurt particularly, but it will not support his weight. He tests it again, with the same result.

With the megodont restrained, order in the unloading area is restored. Hu's body is dragged aside. Devil cats gather near his blood pool, feline shimmers under methane glow. Their tracks pock the potato grime in growing numbers. More paw impressions appear in the muck, closing from all directions on Hu's discarded body.

Tranh sighs. So we all go, he thinks. We all die. Even those of us who took our aging treatments and our tiger penis and kept ourselves strong are subject to the Hell journey. He promises to burn money for Hu, to ease his way in the afterlife, then catches himself and remembers that he is not the man he was. That even paper Hell Money is out of reach.

Potato God, disheveled and angry, comes and studies him. He frowns suspiciously. "Can you still work?"

"I can." Tranh tries to walk but stumbles once again and catches up against the wagon's shattered frame.

Potato God shakes his head. "I will pay you for the hours you worked." He waves to a young man, fresh and grinning from binding the megodont. "You! You're a quick one. Haul the rest of these sacks into the warehouse."

Already, other workers are lining up and grabbing loads from within the broken wagon. As the new man comes out with his first sack, his eyes dart to Tranh and then flick away, hiding his relief at Tranh's incapacity.

Potato God watches with satisfaction and heads back to the warehouse.

"Double pay," Tranh calls after Potato God's retreating back. "Give me double pay. I lost my leg for you."

The manager looks back at Tranh with pity, then glances at Hu's body and shrugs. It is an easy acquiescence. Hu will demand no reparation.

It is better to die insensate than to feel every starving inch of collapse; Tranh pours his leg-wreck money into a bottle of Mekong whiskey. He is old. He is broken. He is the last of his line. His sons are dead. His daughters are long gone. His ancestors will live uncared for in the underworld with no one to burn incense or offer sweet rice to them.

How they must curse him.

He limps and stumbles and crawls through the sweltering night streets, one hand clutching the open bottle, the other scrabbling at doorways and walls and methane lamp posts to keep himself upright. Sometimes his knee works; sometimes it fails him completely. He has kissed the streets a dozen times.

He tells himself that he is scavenging, hunting for the chance of sustenance. But Bangkok is a city of scavengers and the crows and devil cats and children have all come before him. If he is truly lucky, he will encounter the white shirts and they will knock him into bloody oblivion, perhaps send him to meet the previous owner of this fine Hwang Brothers suit that now flaps ragged around his shins. The thought appeals to him.

An ocean of whiskey rolls in his empty belly and he is warm and happy and carefree for the first time since the Incident. He laughs and drinks and shouts for the white shirts, calling them paper tigers, calling them dog fuckers. He calls them to him. Casts baiting words so that any within earshot will find him irresistible. But the Environment Ministry's patrols must have other yellow cards to abuse, for Tranh wanders the green-tinged streets of Bangkok alone.

Never mind. It doesn't matter. If he cannot find white shirts to do the job, he will drown himself. He will go to the river and dump himself in its offal. Floating on river currents to the sea appeals to him. He will end in the ocean like his scuttled clipper ships and the last of his heirs. He takes a swig of whiskey, loses his balance and winds up on the ground once again, sobbing and cursing white shirts and green headbands, and wet machetes.

Finally he drags himself into a doorway to rest, holding his miraculously unbroken whiskey bottle with one feeble hand. He cradles it to himself like a last bit of precious jade, smiling and laughing that it is not broken. He wouldn't want to waste his life savings on the cobblestones.

He takes another swig. Stares at the methane lamps flickering overhead. Despair is the color of approved burn methane flickering green and gaseous, vinous in the dark. Green used to mean things like coriander and silk and jade, and now all it means to him is bloodthirsty men with patriotic headbands and hungry scavenging nights. The lamps flicker. An entire green city. An entire city of despair.

Across the street, a shape scuttles, keeping to the shadows. Tranh leans forward, eyes narrowed. At first he takes it for a white shirt. But no. It is too furtive. It's a woman. A girl. A pretty creature, all made up. An enticement that moves with the stuttery jerky motion of . . .

A windup girl.

Tranh grins, a surprised skeleton rictus of delight at the sight of this unnatural creature stealing through the night. A windup girl. Ma Ping's windup girl. The impossible made flesh.

She slips from shadow to shadow, a creature even more terrified of white shirts than a yellow card geriatric. A waifish ghost child ripped from her natural habitat and set down in a city that despises everything she represents: her genetic inheritance, her manufacturers, her unnatur-

al competition—her ghostly lack of a soul. She has been here every night as he has pillaged through discarded melon spines. She has been here, tottering through the sweat heat darkness as he dodged white shirt patrols. And despite everything, she has been surviving.

Tranh forces himself upright. He sways, drunken and unsteady, then follows, one hand clutching his whiskey bottle, the other touching walls, catching himself when his bad knee falters. It's a foolish thing, a whimsy, but the windup girl has seized his inebriated imagination. He wants to stalk this unlikely Japanese creation, this interloper on foreign soil even more despised than himself. He wants to follow her. Perhaps steal kisses from her. Perhaps protect her from the hazards of the night. To pretend at least that he is not this drunken ribcage caricature of a man, but is in fact a tiger still.

The windup girl travels through the blackest of back alleys, safe in darkness, hidden from the white shirts who would seize her and mulch her before she could protest. Devil cats yowl as she passes, scenting something as cynically engineered as themselves. The Kingdom is infested with plagues and beasts, besieged by so many bioengineered monsters that it cannot keep up. As small as gray *fa' gan* fringe and as large as megodonts, they come. And as the Kingdom struggles to adapt, Tranh slinks after a windup girl, both of them as invasive as blister rust on a durian and just as welcome.

For all her irregular motion, the windup girl travels well enough. Tranh has difficulty keeping up with her. His knees creak and grind and he clenches his teeth against the pain. Sometimes he falls with a muffled grunt, but still he follows. Ahead of him, the windup girl ducks into new shadows, a wisp of tottering motion. Her herky-jerky gait announces her as a creature not human, no matter how beautiful she may be. No matter how intelligent, no matter how strong, no matter how supple her skin, she is a windup and meant to serve—and marked as such by a genetic specification that betrays her with every unnatural step.

Finally, when Tranh thinks that his legs will give out for a final time and that he can continue no longer, the windup girl pauses. She stands in the black mouth of a crumbling high-rise, a tower as tall and wretched as his own, another carcass of the old Expansion. From high above, music

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and laughter filter down. Shapes float in the tower's upper-story windows, limned in red light, the silhouettes of women dancing. Calls of men and the throb of drums. The windup girl disappears inside.

What would it be like to enter such a place? To spend baht like water while women danced and sang songs of lust? Tranh suddenly regrets spending his last baht on whiskey. This is where he should have died. Surrounded by fleshly pleasures that he has not known since he lost his country and his life. He purses his lips, considering. Perhaps he can bluff his way in. He still wears the raiment of the Hwang Brothers. He still appears a gentleman, perhaps. Yes. He will attempt it, and if he gathers the shame of ejection on his head, if he loses face one more time, what of it? He will be dead in a river soon anyway, floating to the sea to join his sons.

He starts to cross the street but his knee gives out and he falls flat instead. He saves his whiskey bottle more by luck than by dexterity. The last of its amber liquid glints in the methane light. He grimaces and pulls himself into a sitting position, then drags himself back into a doorway. He will rest, first. And finish the bottle. The windup girl will be there for a long time, likely. He has time to recover himself. And if he falls again, at least he won't have wasted his liquor. He tilts the bottle to his lips, then lets his tired head rest against the building. He'll just catch his breath.

Laughter issues from the high-rise. Tranh jerks awake. A man stumbles from its shadow portal: drunk, laughing. More men spill out after him. They laugh and shove one another. Drag tittering women out with them. Motion to cycle rickshaws that wait in the alleys for easy drunken patrons. Slowly, they disperse. Tranh tilts his whiskey bottle. Finds it empty.

Another pair of men emerges from the high-rise's maw. One of them is Ma Ping. The other a *farang* who can only be Ma's boss. The *farang* waves for a cycle rickshaw. He climbs in and waves his farewells. Ma raises his own hand in return and his gold and diamond wristwatch glints in the methane light. Tranh's wristwatch. Tranh's history. Tranh's heirloom flashing bright in the darkness. Tranh scowls. Wishes he could rip it off young Ma's wrist.

The *farang's* rickshaw starts forward with a screech of uncoiled bicycle chains and drunken laughter, leaving Ma Ping standing alone in the middle of the street. Ma laughs to himself, seems to consider returning to the bars, then laughs again and turns away, heading across the street, toward Tranh.

Tranh shies into the shadows, unwilling to let Ma catch him in such a state. Unwilling to endure more humiliation. He crouches deeper in his doorway as Ma stumbles about the street in search of rickshaws. But all the rickshaws have been taken for the moment. No more lurk below the bars.

Ma's gold wristwatch glints again in the methane light.

Pale forms glazed green materialize on the street, three men walking, their mahogany skin almost black in the darkness, contrasting sharply against the creased whites of their uniforms. Their black batons twirl casually at their wrists. Ma doesn't seem to notice them at first. The white shirts converge, casual. Their voices carry easily in the quiet night.

"You're out late."

Ma shrugs, grins queasily. "Not really. Not so late."

The three white shirts gather close. "Late for a yellow card. You should be home by now. Bad luck to be out after yellow card curfew. Especially with all that yellow gold on your wrist."

Ma holds up his hands, defensive. "I'm not a yellow card."

"Your accent says differently."

Ma reaches for his pockets, fumbles in them. "Really. You'll see. Look."

A white shirt steps close. "Did I say you could move?"

"My papers. Look—"

"Get your hands out!"

"Look at my stamps!"

"Out!" A black baton flashes. Ma yelps, clutches his elbow. More blows rain down. Ma crouches, trying to shield himself. He curses, "*Nimade bi!*"

The white shirts laugh. "That's yellow card talk." One of them swings his baton, low and fast, and Ma collapses, crying out, curling around a damaged leg. The white shirts gather close. One of them jabs Ma in the face, making him uncurl, then runs the baton down Ma's chest, dragging blood.

"He's got nicer clothes than you, Thongchai."

"Probably snuck across the border with an assful of jade."

One of them squats, studies Ma's face. "Is it true? Do you shit jade?"

Ma shakes his head frantically. He rolls over and starts to crawl away. A black runnel of blood spills from his mouth. One leg drags behind him, useless. A white shirt follows, pushes him over with his shoe and puts his foot on Ma's face. The other two suck in their breath and step back, shocked. To beat a man is one thing . . . "Suttipong, no."

The man called Suttipong glances back at his peers. "It's nothing. These yellow cards are as bad as blister rust. This is nothing. They all come begging, taking food when we've got little enough for our own, and look," he kicks Ma's wrist. "Gold."

Ma gasps, tries to strip the watch from his wrist. "Take it. Here. Please. Take it."

"It's not yours to give, yellow card."

"Not . . . yellow card," Ma gasps. "Please. Not your Ministry." His hands fumble for his pockets, frantic under the white shirt's gaze. He pulls out his papers and waves them in the hot night air.

Suttipong takes the papers, glances at them. Leans close. "You think our countrymen don't fear us, too?"

He throws the papers on the ground, then quick as a cobra he strikes. One, two, three, the blows rain down. He is very fast. Very methodical. Ma curls into a ball, trying to ward off the blows. Suttipong steps back, breathing heavily. He waves at the other two. "Teach him respect." The other two glance at each other doubtfully, but under Suttipong's urging, they are soon beating Ma, shouting encouragement to one another.

A few men come down from the pleasure bars and stumble into the streets, but when they see white uniforms they flee back inside. The white shirts are alone. And if there are other watching eyes, they do not show themselves. Finally, Suttipong seems satisfied. He kneels and strips

the antique Rolex from Ma's wrist, spits on Ma's face, and motions his peers to join him. They turn away, striding close past Tranh's hiding place.

The one called Thongchai looks back. "He might complain."

Suttipong shakes his head, his attention on the Rolex in his hand. "He's learned his lesson."

Their footsteps fade into the darkness. Music filters down from the high-rise clubs. The street itself is silent. Tranh watches for a long time, looking for other hunters. Nothing moves. It is as if the entire city has turned its back on the broken Malay-Chinese lying in the street. Finally, Tranh limps out of the shadows and approaches Ma Ping.

Ma catches sight of him and holds up a weak hand. "Help." He tries the words in Thai, again in *farang* English, finally in Malay, as though he has returned to his childhood. Then he seems to recognize Tranh. His eyes widen. He smiles weakly, through split bloody lips. Speaks Mandarin, their trade language of brotherhood. "*Lao pengyou*. What are you doing here?"

Tranh squats beside him, studying his cracked face. "I saw your windup girl."

Ma closes his eyes, tries to smile. "You believe me, then?" His eyes are nearly swollen shut, blood runs down from a cut in his brow, trickling freely.

"Yes."

"I think they broke my leg." He tries to pull himself upright, gasps, and collapses. He probes his ribs, runs his hand down to his shin. "I can't walk." He sucks air as he prods another broken bone. "You were right about the white shirts."

"A nail that stands up gets pounded down."

Something in Tranh's tone makes Ma look up. He studies Tranh's face. "Please. I gave you food. Find me a rickshaw." One hand strays to his wrist, fumbling for the timepiece that is no longer his, trying to offer it. Trying to bargain.

Is this fate? Tranh wonders. Or luck? Tranh purses his lips, considering. Was it fate that his own shiny wristwatch drew the white shirts and their wicked black batons? Was it luck that he arrived to see Ma fall? Do he and Ma Ping still have some larger karmic business?

Tranh watches Ma beg and remembers firing a young clerk so many lifetimes ago, sending him packing with a thrashing and a warning never to return. But that was when he was a great man. And now he is such a small one. As small as the clerk he thrashed so long ago. Perhaps smaller. He slides his hands under Ma's back, lifts.

"Thank you," Ma gasps. "Thank you."

Tranh runs his fingers into Ma's pockets, working through them methodically, checking for baht the white shirts have left. Ma groans, forces out a curse as Tranh jostles him. Tranh counts his scavenge, the dregs of Ma's pockets that still look like wealth to him. He stuffs the coins into his own pocket.

Ma's breathing comes in short panting gasps. "Please. A rickshaw. That's all." He barely manages to exhale the words.

Tranh cocks his head, considering, his instincts warring with themselves. He sighs and shakes his head. "A man makes his own luck, isn't that what you told me?" He smiles tightly. "My own arrogant words, coming from a brash young mouth." He shakes his head again, astounded at his previously fat ego, and smashes his whiskey bottle on the cobbles. Glass sprays. Shards glint green in the methane light.

"If I were still a great man. . . ." Tranh grimaces. "But then, I suppose we're both past such illusions. I'm very sorry about this." With one last glance around the darkened street, he drives the broken bottle into Ma's throat. Ma jerks and blood spills out around Tranh's hand. Tranh scuttles back, keeping this new welling of blood off his Hwang Brothers fabrics. Ma's lungs bubble and his hands reach up for the bottle lodged in his neck, then fall away. His wet breathing stops.

Tranh is trembling. His hands shake with an electric palsy. He has seen so much death, and dealt so little. And now Ma lies before him, another Malay-Chinese dead, with only himself to blame. Again. He stifles an urge to be sick.

He turns and crawls into the protective shadows of the alley and pulls himself upright. He tests his weak leg. It seems to hold him. Beyond the shadows, the street is silent. Ma's body lies like a heap of garbage in its center. Nothing moves.

Tranh turns and limps down the street, keeping to the walls, bracing himself when his knee threatens to give way. After a few blocks, the methane lamps start to go out. One by one, as though a great hand is moving down the street snuffing them, they gutter into silence as the Public Works Ministry cuts off the gas. The street settles into complete darkness.

When Tranh finally arrives at Surawong Road, its wide black thoroughfare is nearly empty of traffic. A pair of ancient water buffalo placidly haul a rubber-wheeled wagon under starlight. A shadow farmer rides behind them, muttering softly. The yowls of mating devil cats scrape the hot night air, but that is all.

And then, from behind, the creak of bicycle chains. The rattle of wheels on cobbles. Tranh turns, half expecting avenging white shirts, but it is only a cycle-rickshaw, chattering down the darkened street. Tranh raises a hand, flashing newfound baht. The rickshaw slows. A man's ropey limbs gleam with moonlit sweat. Twin earrings decorate his lobes, gobs of silver in the night. "Where you going?"

Tranh scans the rickshaw man's broad face for hints of betrayal, for hints that he is a hunter, but the man is only looking at the baht in Tranh's hand. Tranh forces down his paranoia and climbs into the rickshaw's seat. "The *farang* factories. By the river."

The rickshaw man glances over his shoulder, surprised. "All the factories will be closed. Too much energy to run at night. It's all black night down there."

"It doesn't matter. There's a job opening. There will be interviews."

The man stands on his pedals. "At night?"

"Tomorrow." Tranh settles deeper into his seat. "I don't want to be late." ○

PLAUSIBLE

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us “one member of my small family (my wife) loves parades. ‘Plausible’ comes directly from attending several holiday parades over the last few years, and buying one Powerball ticket—which didn’t win, oddly enough—and trying to make the best of the boredom that comes with watching an endless series of high school bands and crude floats carrying our local dignitaries. What sort of parade would I truly enjoy?” From this pondering, the author has fashioned a truly unusual celebration of the Winter Solstice.

It was a Lullday morning on the brink of winter, a bright and bitterly cold morning, and we were off to watch the Cousins’ parade. But our six-wheel needed fuel and my little sister desperately needed diapers, and that’s why we stopped at the gasoline shop where Telomere met Jupiter. It’s not there now, I know. But there used to be a shop there. My mother stayed in the warm wagon with “her little angel.” My father said, “Fill us,” to the bull-buddy sitting beside the pump. Then he led me inside the grimy glass building, waving in no particular direction. “Look around,” he said with a voice that meant I could pick something small and maybe he would buy it for me. Maybe. So I started running the aisles, giddy-happy because we were going to the parade and because soon I would have some little treasure that I hadn’t expected to own.

What I finally decided on was a pack of collector’s cards with Lord Dullen on top, wearing his two-brimmed pitching hat, the Blood-bird insignia bright on his black mask. How neat will this be? I thought. But Dad didn’t want to buy anything for me. “I only said ‘look around,’” he said. “I wanted to buy some time, you know?” But I didn’t understand. Buy time why? “Well,” he confessed, “the sorry fact is that I don’t much like parades, and I’m trying to delay the inevitable.” He was laughing as he talked. The woman behind the counter was laughing too. She was wearing a narrow mask that let pieces of her face show, which seemed a little dangerous and unsettling to me. Her breasts looked familiar, resembling my teacher’s breasts, small and close together with long pale nipples. Except Mistress Grune was a good deal older, and she always

wore her wedding rings through the nipples. The strange, half-masked woman didn't have rings, and she was laughing with Dad and scratching herself on her exposed neck. I asked what these cards cost. She told me, and it didn't seem like that much. "Oh sure, you can pay your own way," Dad told me. "How much you got, fellow?" But even when I emptied my purse, I was short. Then I asked if I could take just the Lord Dullen card, since he was my favorite player in the world. What would that one card cost? The woman bent down to tell me, "No, bug." With a friendly voice, she said, "I can't break up the pack. But maybe you'd like something else. How about some puppies?" She showed me some flat pups sitting under a lamp, but I said, "No thank you, ma'am." I'd just had breakfast, and besides, they looked old, and from hard experience I knew that dog tastes greasy when you let it sit. But what else could be bought? I wanted something, I didn't care what, and like he promised, Dad was in no mood to hurry. But then I noticed Mom sitting in the six-wheel, staring into the shop and probably wondering what was keeping us. So I pointed at the first thing I saw. Lottery tickets were for sale. From listening to the news, I knew that for the last two months nobody had won so much as a zinc ring. It was a record pot, or nearly so. The number on display had so many Xss behind it I wasn't even sure what to call it. But when I touched the number, Dad laughed and gave the front of my mask a little tug, telling me, "You aren't old enough to dream it. You know that, don't you?"

But I could give him my money, I pointed out.

Dad's teeth were showing, and his eyes were smiling inside his winter mask. "I'll waste my own money, not yours," he told me.

And that would have been that. Except the half-masked woman said, "You know, of course," before letting her voice fall away.

"Of course what?" asked Dad.

"There's the Emperor's loophole," she said.

"We don't have an emperor," I told her.

"But we did," she said. "And the old rule still stands: Every citizen who is the same age, day, and year, that the last emperor was when he inherited the ruler's chair—"

"Good glory, that's right!" Dad laughed.

The woman bent over the counter. Her mask was loose, and it moved against her smiling face. "How old are you, bug?"

I was eight.

"But how many days?" she wanted to know.

I didn't know. Neither did Dad, exactly. But I had my society-card in my purse, and the woman gave it a quick look and did some double-checking of the math. "It's like this," she explained, sounding like my teacher. Smart and sure. "The last human emperor was the Child Emperor, and that was nearly three hundred years ago...and he died the same day he took the throne, which doesn't matter for our purposes. . . ."

She paused, and then said, "Goodness."

I said, "What?"

"He is, isn't he?" my dad asked.

"I am?" I whispered.

Both of the adults were nodding at me.

According to the Law, for this one day I was an adult, with the same rights and privileges that they had.

So I asked, "Is this enough for one ticket?" and pushed my money over the bright copper countertop.

The woman counted my coins and gave me a little bit of change, and then Mom stepped inside with my sister on her hip and her breasts under a wool cloak. She stared at the half-masked woman for a moment or two. Then she started to ask, "What in the blue world of misery is going on—?"

"We're coming," Dad interrupted.

Then the half-masked woman handed me my own new ticket. It smelled of plastic, and it was filled with unlikely numbers that were picked by the machine. The drawing would be today, I read. At High Sun. Then I looked up at her, and because of the angle and because of her loose-fitting little mask, I could see most of her face. She was letting me stare at her chin, which was pointed and lovely, and at her big smiling lips, and the sharp pretty cheeks. "Good luck, bug," she said in a certain way, as if we were the best of friends. Which was when I knew, just knew, that I was going to win the lottery.

My ticket was inside my purse, and my purse was riding on my belt, and I walked fast between my parents, thinking that I wasn't cold but I wasn't warm either. It seemed like a long walk from where we had parked to where we needed to be. And we were officially late by then. Judging by the sounds rolling between the tall buildings, I knew the parade had started: Music and singing and chants and screams, then foot stomping and more screams, and a huge voice calling out, "The Winter Solstice welcomes all!" We were missing the Solstice! "No, no," my Dad said, smiling in that way adults do when they're not quite telling the truth. "He'll come around again. I promise. Twice again, maybe."

Flags on long poles were what I saw first, and the backs of hundreds of onlookers. The wide walk was jammed with bodies, and the flags whapped against themselves in the cold wind. I wouldn't see anything from back here. I was sure of it. Dad put my sister up on his shoulders—her and her fresh diaper too—and she giggled and put her hands over his eyes and giggled some more, nothing else in the world worth doing. Then I started to jump. Straight up, as high as I could. Not high enough to see over anyone's head, but I grunted every time, as if I was being punched in the gut. As much as possible, I wanted to bother my mother. And it worked finally. Hearing enough grunting, she turned and said, "Slip up to the curb, go on. But be polite. And stay directly in front of us. Always."

That's what I had wanted all along.

The onlookers were mostly human, with bull-buddies and heaven-walkers scattered here and there. Up front was a big family of native-giants, camped out on the curb, sitting with their long legs tucked close and their heads still farther from the ground than my head was. I've always liked the smell of the natives, because of their deep fur and the scents they put in their fur, and I liked how their size always scared me at first, but in a pleasant way, like when you stand close to a big but trustworthy

animal. And I liked their deep musical voices, even when I didn't understand what they were saying. They were singing out at the native-giants who were marching past in the parade. Their friends were carrying a row of dark blue flags—the native-giants' official color. Whap-whap, I heard, the flags cracking as the poles were waved one way, then the other. Following them came a thick row of bull-buddies—short and powerful people, patient and steady and practically immune to the winter. They were holding high their forest-green flags, and, despite the cold, their women left their fat breasts uncovered, and everyone was wearing the most beautiful masks, each painted to resemble some left-behind god or taiga spirit. Right after them were the heaven-walkers, holding out their long orange flags. Just the other day, Mistress Grune explained to class that some of the cousins were closer related than others. Several thousand years ago, a few heaven-walkers managed to cross the land bridge and the glaciers, making them the first to find this country. Alone here, they became a new species, growing even taller than before, and even heavier. With this in mind, I noticed how the walkers still looked like our natives, except the walkers had shorter fur, of course. And they tended to wear more clothes. And their voices were completely different than the native voices, harsher and louder, and I didn't like them as much. Or maybe it was because we had a big class of heaven-walkers at my school, and one of its boys was as cruel and wicked as anyone I knew outside my own species.

Next came a row of humans, which meant that more of the crowd was clapping and stomping its feet. I joined in with them, looking up at the gold flags, knowing in my heart that this was the loveliest color of all. Bare brown hands held the flagpoles, and probably a hundred mouths were chanting in unison, saying, "From the Mother Continent, but for the World as One!"

"For the World as One," every species called out.

Three more cousin species followed after the humans. The night-skulkers had the gray flags chosen because of their nocturnal habits and their colorblindness. The little forest-folk used a lighter green than the bull-buddies used. Both of their rows were smaller, since they were scarce in our slice of the world. But rarest were the spice-babies, and what I'd wanted to see was walking alone in a row of one: A single spice-baby dressed in a child's coat and a man's mask, yet his grown body barely two-thirds the size of mine.

These were the rarest of my cousins, dim-witted people but loving.

I waved at him, and he seemed to look over at me, black eyes grinning with what might be happiness or might be habit. Either way, I felt wonderfully blessed to see everybody marching together on this bright wonderful cold morning.

A musical band came next. Bull-buddies and humans blew into horns and beat on big drums that rolled before them.

Then came a dozen horses pulling an old-fashioned kerosene wagon.

And after an empty stretch, there was another band of young humans and natives and heaven-walkers. Everybody had a horn, and some carried two. And the girl in the lead had a bright hoop she threw up high and

caught with an astonishing grace—a tall girl dressed from top to toes and who looked human, right up until she was beside me, her reddish fur showing around the fringes of her broad mask.

She was a mule, I realized. Which wasn't a polite word, I knew. But that's what I was thinking. She was a mule. And for a little while, I was busy feeling sorry for her, wondering what kind of parents would make a child like that.

The humans' mayor followed after the band. Sitting high on the broad shaggy back of an old mammoth, she looked down at me and waved. You didn't see many mammoths in the city, and they were about my favorite part of any parade. He was a proud bull with long tusks and sad eyes and a pain in the belly. While I was watching, he pulled to a stop and flicked his little tail, and then with a wet explosion of gas, he did his business in the middle of the street.

The native-giants beside me were laughing with their big happy voices.

Out of nowhere, a crew of bull-buddies brought out buckets and shovels and cleaned the street before the other mayors came along on their less leaky mammoths.

After the mayors was another walking band—natives wearing nothing but masks and playing their own instruments, singing songs from times when they were the only people in the only world they had ever known.

After them came a long snow-snake, the legs of a hundred heaven-walkers carrying the mythical creature in a weaving path.

Following the snake was the traditional dress-over group—employees of the government, each wearing a different species' mask and clothes, for just this one day. By then, my tropical body was cold, and maybe I was growing a little bored. I thought about slipping back to my parents again and asking for some hot milk and biltong. But then a big balloon rounded the corner, its edges dragging against the buildings. The Condemned were coming; that's what the balloon meant. And from the roaring of the crowd, I knew this was what many of us had come to see.

I felt warm again and not the least bit bored. Between the balloon and me came a couple of floats celebrating winter holidays, and another loud band that made my ears hurt. But I could last through a thousand bands and a million floats, knowing what might happen next.

And this was a very lucky day.

The balloon was shaped like Death as the bull-buddies saw it, and Death was being towed along by a couple of dozen criminals. If you had enough money and the urge, you could step out of the crowd and buy somebody's freedom. You paid the judge that was walking in front of the Condemned, and the judge gave a command to the jailers who then cut the lucky soul free. Then the weight holding the balloon down was a little less, and the feet of the remaining criminals felt a little lighter, scraping their way across the cold face of the world.

While I stood there, watching and hoping, one of the native women rose up from the curb and calmly walked out to meet the judge. A bull-buddy woman-judge, as it happened. The two of them started to talk, and the balloon came to a stop. Whenever the wind gusted, the criminals would grab at their ropes and pull. Then a decision was made. Passing money to the

judge, the native woman pointed at a native man who was wrestling with the ropes, her loud lovely voice telling him, "Not you! Anybody but you!"

Which wasn't all that unusual. Like they say, who hurts you the most? Some cousin species you rarely see, or the species that you sleep with?

"That one," said the charitable native. "Save that heaven-walker, there."

The judge pocketed the money in the public purse, and then with her harsh, deep voice, she told the jailers to cut the fortunate man free.

For a moment, it seemed as if the great balloon would lift up straight away. But the wind fell off, and the Condemned started to walk again, each wishing that somebody would save him next. Spellbound, I watched them shuffling their legs along, shoes fighting to stay against the red bricks and red mortar, hands tugging at the ropes pulled taut above them. But they stayed down, and I began running alongside them. It wasn't a proper thing to do, and I was disobeying some strict orders from my parents. But how often in a life do you get to see amazing sights?

If anyone yelled at me, I didn't hear it.

Then as I came to the next crossing, the wind gusted into my face. The bat-shaped Death caught the breeze with its rubbery wings, and that's when every foot lifted free of the ground. One of the jailers tugged hard on the final rope that was dragging after the balloon, pulling loose a sack of iron ballast that fell with a crash nobody could hear. The crowd was roaring with one voice now, doomed killers and rapists hurling upward into that beautiful blue winter sky.

The balloon had vanished and another band was passing—night-skulkers playing flutes and bellows-organs and jeweled cymbals, accompanied by a troupe of dancers wearing long, nearly weightless capes. Then a hand dropped on my shoulder, and an angry voice said, "Out of my street, little jackal." The skulkers' mask was white as snow, except for the fine black lines around the staring eyes and hard-set mouth. I told him that my parents were back up the street somewhere, probably frantic to find me by now. But he just shook his head, pushing at me, his pale lips saying, "You're just lucky you're not my son. Now get off my street, little man! Go!"

Human people jammed the walk beyond the curb. I pushed into them, and between them, and in a couple of instances, over them. I said I was sorry and please excuse me, please, and then, just as I was slipping free, a stranger's hand touched me hard and came away with my purse.

Who had done that?

I looked at the adults surrounding me. But they were up on their toes, happily watching the dancers. Then I spotted someone dashing away, glancing back at me once before diving into the shadowy mouth of an alleyway.

Funny as it sounds, I was thinking only about my purse. My grandmother had given it to me, and just then that little sack of leather and brass had more value than ten million lottery tickets. I sprinted after the thief, not a drop of fear in me. Only when I was in the shadows did I realize that I was chasing a child no bigger than me. Yet I should have been afraid. A smart thief would have had friends waiting or a knife stashed somewhere close. Anything might have happened in those next moments.

But out of all that is possible, very little can occur. What happened inside that moment was this: The thief found herself trapped against a tall concrete wall, and after touching the wall with her free hand, she turned and said with a sad sweet little voice, "Don't hurt me."

She was a human girl, almost exactly my age.

"I didn't mean it," she lied. "I was just joking."

Give me my purse, I said.

She wore a second-hand mask badly needing fresh paint. Its faded markings gave her a clan and family, but I couldn't recognize either. Which didn't matter, since it almost certainly wasn't her mask to begin with.

Again, I told her that I wanted the purse.

Except by then she'd realized that I wasn't any bigger or older than her. With a sudden resolve, she told me, "I don't think so."

It was my grandmother's gift, I told her again. Then with an ease that took me by surprise, I told a lie. Choking back a fake sob, I claimed that my dear Grandma had died last week, and I missed her terribly.

The thief gave me a long look, and then she opened the purse, quickly examining its contents. I watched her fish out the few coins and my society-card, and my slick new lottery ticket, and then the obsidian arrowhead that I'd found at camp last summer. My society-card had no value to her, but she pocketed the money, and for some reason, the arrowhead was worth keeping too. Maybe she didn't know what the ticket was. Or more likely, she had seen streets littered with old tickets, and she was too much of a pragmatist to hold onto a worthless slip of paper. Whatever the reason, she put my card and then my ticket back inside my purse, and with a girl's clumsy arm, she flung them behind a steel trash-coffin.

I ran in one direction, she fled in another, and we clipped shoulders as we crossed each other's path.

Twenty years later, we would meet again and marry.

Eight years after that, I would discover my glassy black arrowhead buried in a jar of otherwise forgettable trinkets. With an embarrassed voice, my wife would confess to a youthful passion for petty crime, and I would tell her about the Cousins' parade and the alleyway, and every day after that, we would laugh about the wild, marvelous coincidences that give breath to every life.

When I emerged from the alleyway, the Winter Solstice was passing again, riding an enormous float made to resemble an iceberg. He was a bull-buddy dressed in the usual white suit with maroon trim, a huge sack of little gifts at his feet, one strong arm and then the other flinging offerings to the screaming children. Three little packages fell at my feet. I had time to grab up one of them before a pair of young heaven-walkers claimed the others. Inside the colored paper and foam was a little stack of coins—a quantity of money identical to what I started my day with. By contrast, the heaven-walkers got nothing but cheap candy. Yet I was so accustomed to my good luck, I barely even smiled, refilling my purse and then tucking it deep inside my deepest pocket.

I walked back to where I could see my mother holding my sister on her hip. Then my father climbed out from between the native-giants, telling

Mom that he couldn't find me anywhere. He looked furious, and Mom looked scared. So I decided to wait for Dad to vanish again, and then let Mom find me.

From long experience, I knew that was the safest route.

I was still keeping my distance, waiting for Dad to wade back into the crowd, when I heard the pounding of wooden clubs hitting the bricks.

"Your Blood-Birds!" said a huge voice. "Champions of the World!"

The team was in the parade? I hadn't known! Without the barest hesitation, I dove through a group of Holy Shepherdesses, reaching the curb just as my team started to ride past in a string of open twelve-wheelers. There was their bull-buddy leader, old Master Lank, and the best perimeter players in the game—heaven-walkers, quick and graceful. The dogpit was Kalla, a powerful native-giant who used the biggest club in the game. He and the rest of the clubbers were reaching out of the vehicles to bang at the street. And then in the final car were the throwers, including my Lord Dullen—a human man, tall and lanky, wearing his two-brimmed hat and his famous game mask, black as coal with the Blood-Bird insignia filling up the forehead.

Security men were walking beside the twelve-wheelers. And occasionally one of them would stroll over to one curb or the other and pick out a few children, inviting them to come and beg for autographs.

One uniformed man approached me and then told the boy beside me, "Come on."

I walked out with the lucky kid.

"No, not you," the man told me. He was a bull-buddy with a menacing voice and not much else. He looked fat and old and too tired to let himself get into a public brawl with an eight-year-old human.

I ignored him, walking straight for my hero.

Lord Dullen noticed me coming. He had a pen ready, but I didn't have anything to write on. I realized that, and thinking for any excuse, I said he was amazing and great and I had something real special to give him.

"Like what?" he asked.

All I could think of was my lottery ticket. So I yanked my purse out of my pocket and handed him the slip of laminated paper, telling him that I'd bought it today, just for him.

Right away, he told me the exact day I was born on.

But how could he know that?

"Because I always keep track of my emperor's day. Which is today. Plus thirty years, of course." One dark eye winked at me, and he laughed in a pleasant way. "Since you bought that ticket, you claim, that means you're the very same age our emperor was when he took the throne. Which means, my boy, that you and me share a birth date."

I was astonished, but I shouldn't have been. Not really.

"So you bought this gift for me," he said, examining the ticket. "Is that so?"

I nodded and showed him my smile.

"Why don't you ride with me?" Lord Dullen said, reaching out with his empty hand. "Just for a little bit. Okay, my boy?"

My father had finally seen me, and he was chasing after the twelve-

wheeler now. But the fat bull-buddy stopped him short and told him to go back. Dad pointed at me and said a few hard words, and suddenly the bull-buddy was angry enough to forget that he was fat and old. The two of them were shouting at each other, and I didn't want any part of that.

I climbed in beside my hero.

Lord Dullen held the lottery ticket in both hands. It was almost High Sun, and he was looking at the numbers. When he spoke, I smelled something familiar. Beer. That was it; I smelled beer. There was so much noise from the applause and the fight behind me that I had to shout to be heard. But I managed to tell him that he had a great year, and I hoped next year would be even better.

"It won't be," he told me.

I was startled. I couldn't believe he said that.

"I'm serious," he continued. "You know, my boy . . . there were ten or twelve throws I made this year that I shouldn't have made. In key moments, I got very lucky or the clubber got very unlucky, and that's the only reason we won the tournament. A set of circumstances just happened to fall my way, just that once . . . and it won't ever happen again, at least not to me. . . ."

I didn't know what to say.

Then he handed back my ticket, saying, "Thanks, but this is yours."

Up ahead, up where the street turned to the right and where I would eventually climb out, I could see a neon sign. It was exactly High Sun now, and, all of a sudden, numbers began to flash against a black background.

The drawing had been made.

With a wet, beery voice, Lord Dullen said, "Huh. Those numbers. Don't they look kind of familiar, my boy?"

But I wasn't thinking about numbers. I was considering luck and this very exceptional day that was still barely half-finished, and when I looked at everything that had happened already, what was luckiest and most memorable—

"Read your numbers, kid. Come on!"

What meant most to me was when I was standing at that counter and got to look up that woman's half-mask, seeing her practically bare face. It lasted only for a moment, but it was still the best moment . . . and nothing in my life since has ever felt quite so unexpected or even half as wondrous. . . ! ○

Motive, cause, weapon,
but—body in black hole . . .
locked room mystery.

—Greg Beatty

AN ECCENTRIC IN ORBIT

she achieved
escape velocity
running for a bus

hair streaming behind her
papers fluttering away

all those resumes
describing her as a series
of achievements and occupations
career goals and mission statements
in chronological order

she passed over the bus
choked on diesel for a second
avoided a bird
which eyed her suspiciously
no doubt noting
her absence of wings

but she didn't seem to need them
and no one else noticed
that she could fly
faster than a city bus

had no more need
for schedules
transfers
pigeonhole resumes

the earth crawled along beneath her
diminishing

its people becoming
animated dolls

cars—and buses—
the size of her hand
the size of her finger
shrinking into invisibility
until a whole city
was a toy

she could fit in her pocket

she missed the interview
while flying over the ocean
supposed they gave the job
to someone from Topeka

who wore a navy blue suit
with just enough heel
to make her legs pretty

who always made bus stops on time
never flew away

"let her have the job!"

she yelled

"and the profit-sharing plan
and the HMO."

she didn't need to work
unless she happened to come down
like Mary Poppins
to the perfect position—

except that got her wondering
about orbital decay
and what was keeping her up here
since there had been no
solid rocket boosters
no second stage

nothing but her own sturdy legs
pumping as the bus pulled away

nothing but her desire
to get somewhere

somewhere better than the upcoming interview
where someone would no doubt be wishing
she had less thigh and more breast

—like a good roasting chicken—

asking her to account for her time
during the spring and summer of '92

and here she was

■ flying in great circles

around this perfect planet

only worrying a little
about getting back down

after a few more circuits
watching the night creep
across the continents

cities blazing into electric existence

she decided

it was time to go home

and find passion to live by

adjusted her trajectory to impact Minneapolis
and oh, that re-entry burn

—Laurel Winter

IMMUNITY

Susan Forest

Susan Forest is an elementary-school principal in Calgary, Alberta, and a mother of four. Her first novel for young adults, *The Dragon Prince* (Gage Educational Publishers), was awarded the Children's Circle Book Choice Award. She has sold short fiction to *On Spec* and *Tesseracts Ten*. Her compelling first tale for *Asimov's* wrenchingly asks how much can a person be expected to sacrifice for the common good?

Jorge float-stepped to the door, his face ashen under the night fluorescents, and looked from Katya to Trine. "Thanks, Katya."

"Brought her as fast as I could," Katya said. Her breath puffed in small clouds and frost sparkled on the gray-blond tufts of hair sticking out along the rim of her reversed cap.

Trine slipped past Jorge into his module, one of the four-hundred-odd boxes scattered throughout the domes of 403 Station. "Don't know what you're thanking Katya for, Jorge. You know I can't do anything," she said, which was true enough. Trine bounded gracefully to the end of the short corridor, balancing with her fingertips against the walls. "Your dad in the small bedroom?" she asked. These modules were all the same. Trine had one as well.

"Go on in," Jorge said. "He probably can't talk."

Trine shucked her parka, not unhappy to set aside the paperwork and stretch her legs. Jorge had been calling the main office in panic since he'd driven into communication range from the ore station at Mile Forty-Eight, but after twenty hundred hours, only the computer answered. It was just luck—bad or good—that had kept Katya until this hour, grubby overalls streaked with oil, still working on that stubborn grocery truck. The twentieth century met the twenty-fifth, out here.

And Katya happened to pick up.

Trine had been nodding over a report decrying proposed new regulations for outpost administrator qualifications when Katya glided into her office and relayed Jorge's message. Trine checked her watch. Twenty-three hundred. She should have gone home to Jill a couple of hours ago.

"It's old Greg," Katya said. "Think you better come see him. Jorge says he isn't breathing too good."

"Sick?"

"Yep. Something."

Trine powered down her terminal and grabbed her parka. God, she wished there were doctors on these ore stations.

At the main door she punched in the lock sequence and they let themselves fall lightly to the gravel compound. Frost from the moisture of the station inhabitants accumulated on the high metallic dome with every cold-side rotation—about six days—and sometimes it drifted lazily to ground as it did tonight, sparkling in the night fluorescents. Katya and Trine's feet crunched the gravel at long intervals as they ran in slow bounds across the compound.

They headed into one of the arms that connected the scatter of atmosphere-controlled domes that made up 403 Station. Some mining company put up the first dome about a hundred years ago, later going out of business or abandoning the investment for more profitable finds. Since then, small-time prospectors and drifters, mostly, wound up here, come to make their fortunes, then move on.

The government had sent Trine as their administrator two years earlier, and about once a month she toured each of the other half-dozen moons orbiting C-10427. She kept the peace, collected taxes, and acted as doctor, lawyer, and, occasionally, dentist. The long hours each day away from Jill weren't what she wanted for her daughter, but after a couple more years in the boonies Trine would be promoted somewhere big enough to have a school, maybe make enough for a live-in nanny. Maybe see a VR dome or eat in a restaurant. That would be fine.

Now, Trine pushed through the doorway to Greg's bedroom and the others crowded in behind. Greg shivered under his blankets, grey hair wisping in every direction from his skull, and the rattle of his breathing echoed off the metallic walls. His gaze locked on Trine.

"Hey, Greg," Trine said. She set herself on the only chair in the room, next to the bed. "Heard you had to come back early after you hauled all those gold nuggets out of the mine. Got enough, did you?" She pulled plastic gloves and a handful of sample containers from the pouch at her side.

Greg nodded, more of a blink of his eyes than any movement that could constrict his throat.

Trine leaned on the arm of her chair and twisted the gooseneck lamp to shine on Greg's face. She took swabs of mucus from his eyes, nose, and ears and skin samples from the back of his hand and labeled them for the lab. "Sorry, Greg. Jorge wanted me to have a look at you. I got to say, you look a little grey."

"Those scaly patches're on his chest and legs, too," Jorge said.

"He got a fever?"

"Hundred and two."

Trine leaned back and looked at Katya. "Glad you came right away."

"What is it?" Katya asked.

"Well, it sure isn't a cold, is it?" Trine trashed the gloves and pulled her Dummy from her pouch. She flipped up the screen and keyed in her password. She scrolled through the memos that had come through in the last three weeks. "Here." She read for a moment. "Jorge. Does he have a cough with thick mucus?"

"He was coughing when he came up from the mine."

Trine grimaced, a numbness creeping into her stomach. She read further. "Did you look at his throat? Is it inflamed and swollen? Really red?"

"Not when I checked him at the mine."

"How about now?"

Jorge pushed Greg's bed away from the wall so he could slide up beside him. "Open up, Pops."

Katya pulled a pencil beam from her overalls.

"Jorge. Gloves."

"I ain't gonna get sick, Trine." He leaned over Greg, who opened his mouth.

"Katya, go in the bathroom and find Jorge a pair of gloves."

Jorge groaned. "Stinking bureaucrats."

"And I don't give a shit if you do get sick, but there's five hundred and seventy-three people on this station, and some of them are kids, like mine. Now, use gloves."

Katya slapped Jorge on the shoulder with a pair of thin gloves. "Come on, Jorge, do as she says. She's the law."

"Judge, jury, and executioner." Jorge ignored the gloves and leaned over his father with the pencil light. "Yep. Red throat." He straightened. "What's he got?"

Trine folded the screen on the Dummy and tapped it on her knee. "This isn't good."

Jorge nodded toward the doorway.

"Nah." Trine shook her head. "Greg, I don't know what the hell you got, but there's something going around the trade lanes called DP-41. You don't have to worry. The medicine came on the last government shipment, about two weeks ago. We'll give you a dose of it and see if it clears up, all right?"

Greg's frown vanished and he lifted his hand to grasp Trine's with a grip borne of worry and relief. He swallowed in an effort to speak, but caught himself in a fit of coughing instead.

"I'll read up on it and be back in an hour. You just stay warm and—hey, Greg—keep breathing. Jorge'll be here with you." She gripped his hand and smiled her good-bye, then slipped with a low gravity bounce from the room.

She turned to speak with the others in the kitchen. "We've got a hell of a problem."

Jorge stopped short. "What? You just said he'd be fine."

"He probably will. Damn. If this was a company town, I'd have the whole thing locked down. Jorge, we know you're exposed. You're in quarantine."

"What?"

"Katya, you can go home, but do a complete bio-cleanse and wear gloves and a mask for a while. I don't care if you feel perfectly healthy. I'm going to do the same."

"That bad?" Katya asked.

"No, not with the medicine." Trine flipped open her Dummy. "But when did you ever see 403 Station first on anyone's list to get anything?"

"What about—without medicine?" Jorge asked. His face paled.

Trine sank into a chair. God, she was tired. It must be past one hundred hours. "According to the memo, it's like a lot of things. Babies and old folks like Greg need to watch out. Anyone with a compromised immune system or sick from something else."

Katya took off her cap and pushed her hair back. "You mean it can be fatal."

Trine scrolled through her menus. "Yeah. Just like a mining accident."

"And, we don't have enough medicine," Katya said.

"Well, maybe. Depends on how many get sick. Which is why Jorge's in quarantine." She turned to Jorge. "And as soon as you can, Jorge, send me a list of all the shifts that worked your pit in the last two weeks. They're on quarantine, too."

"Two weeks . . ." Jorge's eyes shifted from Trine to Katya and back to Trine. "It was here—symptom free—for two weeks?"

Katya leaned on the corner of the table. She glanced at Trine. "That's when the last government shipment came."

"The last contact with Outside," Trine said. "My guess is we were infected then."

"Shit, you can't close down the mine, the store, *everything*." Jorge ran his hands through his hair. "For how long?"

"Two more weeks."

"But what good will that do?" Katya asked. "We're all infected already—aren't we?"

"Maybe not," Trine said. "Greg and Jorge were at Mile Forty-Eight. We got people scattered around six settlements. Some we don't see for weeks at a time. If we scrub everything down, keep people quarantined, and just use the medicine for the worst cases—kids under one year and old geezers like Greg—maybe we've got a shot," Trine said. "Jorge, if you get sick, just stay in bed and eat soup. You'll be fine."

"Says you."

"Says the Quadrant Health Authority."

"Meanwhile, my mine loses fifty thousand a day." Jorge kicked the jacket on the floor into the boots in the entry.

"Better that than even one miner dying," Katya said.

"I'll send out a general alert and get some volunteers to distribute supplies so people don't have to come in to the Hub for food," Trine said. "And I'll shut down public transit."

"Lots of people in outlying areas have their own hydrocars," Katya pointed out. "Some don't log on for days. That's why they live out here on this rock. They don't like people."

Trine flipped her Dummy closed. "I know."

When Trine got back to her office, seventeen calls were logged on to her computer. She worked through the night putting together a mobilization plan, and, before the dome fluorescents faked dawn, started calling those who could help. Katya was one of the few in the central Hub who didn't show symptoms in the first few days of the outbreak, and she became one of Trine's deputies.

Trine doled out the medicine only to those who fit a strict set of criteria. For a week, she was scared that they would be facing funerals before the ordeal was over, but unlike the story on lots of other planets, people on 403 Station got sick, stayed in bed, and got better. The station began to recuperate, and Trine cut back to ten-hour days.

Then the second wave hit.

Calls came from stations on each of the moons of C10427. She sent

them the protocols and fifty doses of medicine, and followed up with a visit to assign deputies and handle emergencies.

While she was gone, a man, an alcoholic of sixty-seven, died. His profile hadn't fit the criteria, so he was given no medicine, and his wife threatened to sue. Two more deaths followed.

Trine cut short her tour and hurried home.

Katya's grandson, just over two years old, was the first of the children to die.

Trine double-checked her Dummy as the supply truck drove away from the Hub warehouse. Although the station was in its second day of warm-side, the distant sun shed little light and less heat to penetrate the translucent panels on the domes. She rubbed her neck and stretched, pulling her eyes from the rows of tiny numbers on her Dummy to rest on the length of compound to the dome wall. Someone was approaching from one of the tunnels.

Her stomach tightened.

It was Katya. Lipstick, carefully curled hair and black dress pants struck Trine as incongruent with a mine jacket and boots until she realized why Katya had dressed up.

Trine lowered her Dummy, her mouth dry.

Katya's head bobbed in a short nod as she stopped beside Trine.

Trine's tongue felt stiff, as though she hadn't used it for a long time. "I wanted to come to the ceremony."

"I know," Katya said. "The outbreak. You were busy."

"There are still so many . . . so many. Ninety-three. A fifth of the station."

"Yeah."

A slight breeze from the circulation system teased Katya's hair. She looked tired. Old.

"How many doses left?" Katya's voice was casual, but the pain in her glance belied her words.

Trine pressed her lips together. "Twenty-one. We've re-done the protocols, Katya. Medicine's only for kids under three, now."

Katya nodded, her head barely moving, eyes not leaving Trine. "What will you do, Trine, if there is medicine left? If you could have saved some of the ones who died, but didn't?"

Trine held her gaze, her nostrils wide, trying to find air as her throat shut down. "I'm so sorry, Katya . . ."

Katya repeated her close-lipped nod as though this were the only action left. "Yes," she whispered hoarsely. "I know." She turned from Trine.

"Katya—"

"I'm sorry, I can't talk to you right now."

Trine grabbed her arm. "We've made children a priority."

"You have," Katya snapped. "Not 'we.'"

Trine felt slapped.

"Sorry."

"No, you're right. *I* have. It was me." She wanted to wrap her arms about Katya, hold her like a child, but she couldn't. A formality, a rigidity lay between them.

"The last doses . . ." Trine tried again to soothe Katya's anguish. "None will be for the old. Children. Just children."

Katya dropped her gaze. "A little late," she said bitterly.

Trine took her hand from Katya's arm. "I'm sorry."

Katya let a deep breath escape. "I have to go."

Trine held herself from following as Katya shuffled toward the tunnel.

"Mommy."

Trine pulled her head from the covers, instantly awake.

Jill stood beside the bed, her white nightie reflecting a shred of fluorescent glow from beyond the curtained windows.

An ache, like a great weight, pressed on Trine's shoulders, neck, and head—the remains of the day's exhaustion. "Come on, honey," she said. She stretched out her arm to make a cave of her covers. "Come in with me. It's cold. Did you have a dream?"

The girl scampered into bed. She shivered and pressed burning skin up against Trine's body. Tears streamed from her eyes and nose. "It hurts." She coughed.

Trine's back and shoulders bunched and her breath collapsed from her chest. Wait—she told herself not to panic. None of the babysitter's kids were sick.

She raised herself on one elbow to peer down onto Jill's face in the dark. She found a tissue to wipe her daughter's eyes and nose, and held the back of her hand to her cheek. "Where does it hurt, baby?" She fumbled on the bedside table for the lamp switch.

"Everywhere. My neck." She coughed again.

Trine switched on the lamp and Jill squeezed her eyes shut, turning her face into Trine's chest. "Come on, baby, I need to look in your throat."

The child turned back and obediently opened her mouth, eyes screwed shut and cheeks flaming. The throat was red and raw, with grey patches. Trine flicked the light off and held her daughter close, heart pounding with fear.

"It hurts, Mommy," Jill whispered again.

"I know, baby." Trine took a deep breath and forced herself to think logically. Jill was three years old, almost four. There was a good chance she would be fine with rest and symptom management. "Listen, honey, I'm going to get you a drink to make your throat feel better, and a pill so you're not so hot, okay? Then let's have a really good sleep. You can sleep as much as you like. I'll call Mrs. Ahenda, and you can stay home with me tomorrow."

Jill cuddled closer. "I love you a million million."

"I love you, too. Up to the sky."

Trine called Katya in the morning to put herself on quarantine. Jill slept, for which Trine was grateful. She cleaned the house, read, checked Jill. The anti-pyretics reduced the fever and the cough lessened. Trine logged on to her Dummy to keep connected with work.

Predictably, Trine began to cough that afternoon as she played cards with Jill. She felt rotten, but she only had herself and Jill to care for. Katya and the others kept up with the work as well as anyone could. A

hundred and sixteen cases had been reported, and two more deaths. The Quadrant Health Authority promised more medicine next week, but right now they said too many planets were affected. Administer water in any form—by mouth, in food, or as a vapor—and provide symptomatic relief, they said. Hold on.

At two in the morning, Jill threw up. Trine climbed from her bed and changed the sheets, wiping the floor and leaving the towels in the laundry for morning. She couldn't give her an anti-pyretic because the child had had one at midnight, so she gave her a cool bath. She wrapped Jill in towels and cuddled her daughter until her sobs subsided and she fell asleep.

At three-thirty, Jill threw up the water Trine had given her. Trine put her hands to her daughter's burning face and peered into her fever-bright eyes. She brought her into her own bed, but didn't sleep. Visions played through her head, of Katya's face on the monitor as she told Trine about her grandson's death; of Jill's pale skin and trusting eyes; of the safe, hospital isoenvironments and attentive doctors she let slip away when she took the post on this barren rock.

At four-forty-five Jill woke and heaved on an empty stomach, breathing noisily. Trine made her sit up and looked in her throat. The grey scales covered her throat and Trine found that they had spread to her stomach and back. Trine tried to give her an anti-pyretic, but she couldn't swallow. She sang to Jill and held her and watched her. Jill didn't fit the criteria for medicine.

What if there was medicine left after the outbreak passed? Two days ago, there had been twenty-one doses.

Trine calculated in her head. The epidemic had begun just over three weeks ago. According to the memos, individuals were only sick for a week, not more. How many more would become sick now? How many of those would be critical? The sick ones were recovering and the rest had proved they weren't going to get it. Most of the rest. More medicine would be here in a week.

How would she feel if there was medicine left over?

Jill gasped, strangling. Her eyes went round with panic. She struggled with the sheets, tried to flee the bed.

"Hush, baby, hush," Trine soothed. "Stay still. Look at me." She stroked Jill's arms and face until she quieted. "Don't cry, baby. I'm going to get you a nice drink. I'll be right back."

She disengaged herself from Jill's grasp and slipped from the room. She discarded her clothes and found herself a bio-suit with mask and gloves.

No one was in the compound at five in the morning, but the sun shone as brightly as ever through the dome panels, fifth day into warm-side. Trine put her head down and float-walked in as un-hurried and business-like a way as she could to the office complex. She ungloved and flicked her palm on the pad to unlock the outer door.

The corridor was dimly lit and hollow sounding through the muffling of the bio-suit masking.

A light was on in the main office.

Trine approached softly, looking through the glass door. Katya sat at a computer.

She hesitated.

Katya looked up from her slow keyboarding and saw Trine through the glass.

There was nothing to do but proceed. Trine unlocked the door and entered.

"Trine."

"Katya. You're here early."

"You shouldn't be here. It's been less than a day."

Trine went to her inner office. "Couldn't sleep. Thought I could take some work home. Don't worry, I won't disturb anyone. Got the bio-suit." She keyed in her password and the door opened.

Katya turned at her station and watched as Trine entered her office.

Once inside, Trine took a breath. The medicine was in the storage room next to her office. She looked at the piles of mem-chips on her desk, sorted through a few of them but couldn't focus on which ones to bring home. Shit, they all needed work. She shoved them into a briefcase and clicked it shut.

Now what? What excuse to get into the supply room? Three weeks ago, Katya didn't have the authority to go in there. Now she sat in the front office like a watch dog.

Trine moved from her office to the supply room. She knew Katya was watching her.

The medicine was in a locked cabinet. Trine pressed her thumb on the fingerprint recognition panel. There was a click. She opened the cabinet door.

Four doses of medicine sat on the shelf.

"Trine?"

Trine took one and slipped it into her pocket. She closed the cabinet and pressed her thumb on the panel. She heard the lock click.

She breathed.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, that's fine."

She scanned the shelves. Panic rose in her stomach. What else was in the supply room? Blank mem-chips of different sizes, platinum thread, replacement hydro cells, clips, Dummy packs. She took three of the large blank mem-chips.

She turned. Katya stood by the computer in the main office, looking at her.

Trine float-stepped from the supply room, closing the door behind her. She stopped at the reception desk and locked eyes with Katya. "Needed some of the big mem-chips." Trine held them up, but Katya didn't look at them. "Big report . . ."

Katya shook her head ever so slightly. A cold sheen crept into her eyes. "Yeah."

Trine held her gaze, her heart thumping. "Jill is pretty sick."

Katya's lips whitened. "Better get back to her."

Trine's cheeks burned beneath the bio-suit. "Yeah."

The government transport stood on the pad, gleaming in the huge

lights used during dark side launches. Trine showed her exit visa to the captain and crew at the dome air lock. A car waited to take her and the last few passengers from the dome to the gantry.

"Everyone at the Quadrant Office is shaking their heads, you know," Pete said. He leaned an elbow on the car. "No one wants you to go, Trine." No?

Trine tucked her official mem-chip into her bag and looked back at the hub, the cluster of dwellings and warehouses. The administration building. She hadn't spoken to Katya since that night.

Katya tried. She'd called Trine the next day but Trine let the computer answer. She called the day after, and the one after that and the one after that. She finally got the hint.

Jorge was more direct. He stopped by the administrative office once Trine was back to work and surrounded by every excuse to close her office door. He talked his way past the secretary and slumped into the chair opposite her desk.

"Mine's back in operation," he said by way of chit chat. "Sending ore to the refinery."

Trine looked up from her screen and tried to pull on her polite, official smile for him. "I know." She tapped the computer. "Got the memos."

He nodded. Smiled.

He knew. Everyone knew. Katya hadn't told, but they could count. They could see Jill get suddenly well. And they were all so damn solicitous.

Trine looked down at her fingertips. Her smile felt stiff.

"Yep."

She waited.

Jorge didn't budge from the chair.

"That's good." She hunted among her mem-chips for a stylus.

"Men are all back at work."

Trine felt as though her smile was going to crack.

"Yep."

He smiled.

Rage boiled up inside her. "Jorge," she said, swallowing her anger back, "can I do anything for you?" She forced her bureaucratic smile up to meet his eyes.

"Nothing you ain't already done. My dad's fine. Wanted to thank you."

Trine felt heat spill into her face. She pressed her lips closed on her smile and focused on breathing evenly.

Jorge leaned forward in his chair. "Trine, Katya wants to talk to you."

"You know, Jorge, I know that," Trine said as quickly as she could, sorting through her mem-chips, "and I do mean to get back to her as soon as I can clear up some of this backlog—"

"She ain't gonna bite you, Trine. You did what you could—"

Trine stood. "Jorge, I got a lot—"

He climbed to his feet and leaned on the desk. "There were three doses of medicine left—after all was said and done—wasn't there? Did you want four gone to waste instead of three? And after all you did for everyone—"

"Jorge, you're going to have to go now." She held the door for him, the cracking sensation spreading from her stomach to her throat. She kept her eyes steadily at his feet.

"—who could blame you if . . ."

She held the doorknob rigidly, wishing her ragged breathing were not audible to the next moon.

"Damn it, Trine!"

The secretary looked up.

Jorge raised his hands as though he were going to shake her by the shoulders but she huddled by the door gulping and swallowing, unable to look at him.

"You're not perfect! All right?"

She trembled, her face streaming.

"That's all Katya wanted to tell you. That's all anyone wanted to tell you. It's all right."

Trine shook her head. No. No.

"Blast it, woman!"

"Trine?" the secretary called.

Trine took one long, shuddering breath. No.

"Never mind, I was just leaving." Jorge threw his hands down to his sides in impotent rage. "Rules is just rules, Trine. You made up that rule about babies and old folks. Things change. You didn't need to try to let Jill die just to show you're fair."

No. Not two separate sets of rules—one for Trine, one for everyone else. When you lose integrity, you lose everything. You lose your self.

She listened as his footsteps marched across the outer office and down the corridor. She listened to the silence she knew was filled with eyes—her secretary, the delivery boy, the clerk from across the hall, the truckers, the miners, the drifters, the children, the . . .

Wherever she went, she felt them. Eyes, watching.

Trine wasn't sure how she had managed the last three weeks until her resignation could be processed. But after Jorge, no one invaded her privacy again.

Pete was different. He was from Outside. He didn't know.

"I wish you'd reconsider staying," he said.

"No, Pete. I've made up my mind."

"Yeah, but Trine, you're a great administrator. Just look at this infection that swept through our sector last month. Some stations had riots. At some, half the colonists were wiped out. You had fewer than twenty mortalities. Another year and you would've qualified for a post in the Inner Complex. You ever been there?"

"I've seen vids."

"There's nothing like it. Trae has people from every system. And Thena—you should see the food! Fashions from everywhere. Biotech. Nanotech. Or Sepia Two. It's like living inside an acceleration tube. You'd never sleep in case you missed something. Trine, think about it. Money. City life. Great projects to work on. Hey! Private school for your little girl."

Trine shrugged. If she didn't reply he might stop talking and get on with it. Getting away felt like an itch under her skin. She could see the rocket, *there*, waiting, so close. She looked back at the lonely cluster of buildings. Katya was in one of them.

Trine opened the door to the car and Jill hopped in. Safe.

Safe.

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I don't know." She climbed in beside Jill. "Live." ○

Brian Aldiss recently wrote the introduction to the catalogue for a new exhibition entitled "The Starry Messenger." He is also about to complete a novel, "the title of which has still to be decided: it will either be *Gods also Die* or *What was Voluptuous is now Boney*." This master of satire returns to our pages with a look at a very strange future where either everyone or absolutely no one is . . .

SAFE!

Brian W. Aldiss

I

The nuclear-powered craft appeared motionless in the great matrix men still called space. It was but a mite in the vast gulf beyond the planet Mars. It contained two men. It traveled faster than had any previous vehicle.

Already, Earth and Sun were far behind. Of the two men aboard the craft, one, Hill Glantaga, was destined not to reach their destination. It was the second man, Raff Darnley, who would eventually tread where no human being had previously trod.

Glantaga had had dreams. Darnley dreamed of magnificent globes, hanging like jewels in the throat of heaven.

The two men passed the years of voyage mainly in cryosleep. Month by month, alternately, they were woken to exercise, in order to retain their muscular tone. The one who exercised worked for two days. He drank of a sustaining fluid and then climbed back into the care-capsule to remain deeply inert beside his partner, all life-functions suspended.

Years and distances wore away. The craft approached the gas giant Jupiter, lordly and bright inside its sphere of gravity and its magnetosphere. Automatic controls, governed from Earth, slowed the craft. All about it sped fast-moving particles. They tinkled against the reinforced hull.

Only weeks of travel remained. High over the gas giant, curtains of particles hung, dull, threatening, trapped in Jupiter's magnetic field. The nuclear craft maneuvered below the cluster of small moons and galactic debris. Finally, over a million kilometers from Jupiter, they arrived at their destination.

Ganymede.

In the control room back on Earth, men, who had been boys when the craft launched, cheered and waved their arms about.

Raff Darnley did not cheer. His expression was stern and without hint of triumph when they arrived safely, and as he stepped out on the surface of the immense moon.

He raised his arms in salutation to the solitude.

2

Darnley spent seventeen days on Ganymede in silence, absorbing the magnificent stillness of the world that he alone knew, before he sent his first subcast to UNISTE H.Q.

"I offer you my vision of Earth. It resembles a living head, a monstrous head, with varying levels of consciousness. The narrowest, flimsiest level is the conscious layer of humanity, with its various unbalanced degrees of intelligence and logical thought. Below that level lies the subconscious, which possesses two sub-levels, one being the world of animals and insects, the other of plant life, the semi-sentient. Below that, a still deeper impenetrable layer, formed by the main biomass of bacteria and parasitic viruses, which interpenetrate all the other levels, working insensately. In all these levels, ruthless competition takes place.

Lastly is an unconscious level. This is the planet itself, the mantle and the crust, combining a ceaseless movement of tectonic plates, breeding earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, and many disasters, together with the ceaseless hydrosphere and punitive changing climates and temperatures.

All together, these levels form a structure of ceaseless and meaningless activity, the mad thoughts of a brain at war with itself.

And is there no Superego? you may ask. Now there is. I am remote from this terrible disorder and can look down upon it with disdain. I am your Superego."

3

On the office door of the Chief of Staff of UNISTE was a notice that read CHIEF OF STAFF, UNITED NATIONS INTERPLANETARY SPACE TRAVEL ENTERPRISES. PLEASE KNOCK.

Ignoring the notice, Tommy Bender marched into the office. James T. Braek, the CoS, was eating a cream bun.

"Do you mind?" he said, framing the words with frilly artificial additives.

"Sorry, boss, but there's some consternation going on." You would hardly know from looking casually at Tommy Bender that he was married, so blithe was his appearance, so smart his clothes. He cared a lot about clothes.

"I've done consternation for today, thanks," said Braek, curtly.

"But this is Ganymede consternation." And Bender laid before Braek's eyes a print-out of the message just in from Captain Raff Darnley, the sole inhabitant of Jupiter's largest satellite, Ganymede.

Braek was a good family man, with two daughters by his first wife and a boy by his third. He was cool in a crisis. But the flimsy made him drop the remains of his bun and rise to his feet.

"This is terrible!" he said. "How dare he insult us? The Ganymede operation costs a fortune. Get Darnley on the vox."

"That ain't so easy, boss. Ganymede is a long ways distant."

"Oh, sure. I was forgetting."

"And right now Ganymede happens to be on the far side of Jupiter." Braek licked his fingers. He hated know-alls.

4

GANYMEDE. One of Jupiter's twenty-seven named moons.

DISTANCE from Jupiter: 1,070,000 km

TIME OF ONE REVOLUTION: seven days, three hours

TIME OF ORBIT ROUND SUN: 11.86 years

DIAMETER: 5.268 km—larger than Mercury

Heavily cratered.

JUPITER. Distance: 5.202 (Ast. units) or 778.3 millions of kms from Sun.

5

This was Raff Darnley's second subcast back to Earth:

"I am safe!

"I am away from your contagion. You must understand how of all the species striving for existence on Earth, it is your species, the human species, which has over-run everywhere. Perhaps the mosquitoes are as ubiquitous, but they do not destroy whole habitats or cover good ground with sprawling buildings.

As for those buildings, they have taken on human attributes. They require air and air-conditioning. They consume electricity, they have sewage to dispose of, and they tend to close down at night.

If not maintained, buildings fall into ruin. Their rooms collapse into mold and decay. So with you humans. You fall into decay and die and rot.

Consider that condition. Once there is necrosis of the cells, the precarious symbiosis between you and the bacteria that swarm within you is over. Microorganisms swarm out of the gut and you begin to look more horrible than in life. You begin to stink. That stench of decay is all about you.

You ally yourselves with that stench. For you are always at war some-

where or other, killing people like yourselves, to add to the great physical and moral stink of the planet. Frankly, the human species is just a farce."

6

Florence, Mrs. James T. Braek, was having her hair done. Pandora, her hairdresser, was chattering away in a fashion she believed to be amusing. "So Hetty—I told you how funny she was—she has insisted on an old-fashioned marriage, if you can believe that. All was planned for June, and now they are going to hold the wedding day till September, because she is having this child in May. I said to Harvey, I said—"

The words to Harvey were never reported. Into Florence's luxury suite came James T. Braek himself.

"Hi, Flo, having your hair done again so soon?"

"Coiffed," she said, correcting him.

"Flo, would you say we were always at war, killing people like ourselves?"

She could not move her head. But a finger was waggable. "You, are you thinking if that's like ourselves?"

"I'm talking in the abstract. Would you say we are adding to any moral stink?"

"Of course not. Go away, James. Pour yourself a generous glass of Wild Turkey and relax."

"It's what this madman is about—one of two we put on Ganymede, Flo, honey. That's what he's saying. It's upsetting the population."

The dainty if slightly shriveled finger wagged again. "It's not upsetting me, and it's not upsetting Pandora, is it, Pandora?"

Pandora said that yes, she was upset. Why did Hetty choose early September just when she, Pandora, was going on this Caribbean cruise?

"I got a sneaking feeling she just did all this out of spite."

James T. Braek went away and had a generous measure of Wild Turkey as instructed.

7

The craft rested on a region of the surface close between a dark area and light regolith. The coordinates were as planned:

The craft would never again lift from its resting place. Its landing gear had been damaged on touch-down. It could be cannibalized as far as was possible. Its nuclear plant continued to function.

Raff Darnley stepped down from the craft and walked forward, assisted by skis. Ice crackled underfoot. The ability to walk on two legs, inherited from an ancestral ape, felt new to him. He experienced pleasure in setting one foot in front of the other.

It was the walking, rather than the *walking on Ganymede*, which occu-

pied him at first. "I am a forked creature: this is how I progress." The light about him was clear if faint. It embalmed the surroundings in glass.

He stood on a slight eminence and looked about.

Darnley was immune to concepts of beauty or ugliness. What he relished was the prospect of his isolation, expressed in the pattern of furrow and fissure all about. The only definite feature was some way distant, the Mill, which had arrived two years before him, which would continue to bore and grind, grind and bore, and should by now have accumulated a fair tonnage of oxygen and water for his survival.

He would visit the Mill when he had got the buggy into action.

The Japanese lantern of Jupiter began to heave itself over the horizon. He was not interested in Jupiter as yet. He returned to his craft. There he divested himself of his spacesuit. He stood in the cabin, thinking, making calculations. "If I can, I will rid myself of my humanity like I get out of my suit."

He sat at the day-computer. For a long while he said nothing to it.

8

Darnley had to bend his mind to the disposal of Hill Glantaga's corpse. He disliked the possibility that it would remain in its pod, in the craft, consuming electricity. He activated the servant, Android Wi110.

Wi110 lifted up Glantaga's body. He took it to the airlock, and from there proceeded to the surface. Darnley watched from the cabin, concerned in case the intense cold should de-activate his servant. He saw that Wi110 battled against a storm of micro-particles.

The android laid the dead body in a furrow and returned to the craft.

"The job is performed, sir."

"Right. Switch off."

Darnley had discovered that Glantaga, during his brief spells of consciousness on the long journey to Ganymede, had played games on his computer. He had also watched old baseball games in the Library. These were signs of a trivial mind, in Darnley's view. Such distractions implied that Glantaga was not a mature thinker.

Darnley approached Glantaga on the subject when they had both been revived for the Jupiter approach.

"Your trouble is, you're an intellectual," said Glantaga, with a dismissive gesture.

"Yes, your kind fear those of us who have discarded toys and other playthings. You are mentally still a child."

"And proud to be. Better than a living fossil like you. You don't have no human warmth."

"Any human warmth, you should say—if being correct interests you, which I doubt."

Glantaga raised a clenched fist. "I'll speak how I frigging like!"

It was clear to Darnley that his fellow crewman would provide only irritating company on Ganymede. That could not be tolerated.

Now the fellow was out of the way.

"One must distance oneself from the illusion of companionship. I am here to profit from that freedom.

"The nearest human being is thankfully some eight hundred billion kilometers away."

This reflection gave him immense pride. He felt safe.

9

Tommy and Marie Bender were out on the town with friends. They had just moved to a new nightclub. Their friends were the Gotmans, Wilf and Debbie Gotman. Wilf had been an astronaut in the days of chemical rockets and was getting on a bit now. Debbie ran a profitable jewelry store.

She was making them laugh about the mannerisms of one of her most difficult customers.

"... And guess who this customer was? Why, it was Florence Braek!"

The four of them collapsed into helpless laughter.

A few drinks later, Tommy and Wilf were talking sports. Debbie Gotman asked Marie how her son, Forry, was getting on.

Forry was the one blemish on the Benders' perfect marriage, apart from Tommy's adultery with his secretary, Tamara Sobchak.

"Oh, I guess we have to give up on Forry," said Marie, pulling a sorrowful face. "That boy is a real loser. Last time he called me, around about a month ago, he said he was going to throw away his call phone so's we couldn't bother him again."

"Terrible," said Debbie, whose two daughters both worked for her in her store. "Some folks never develop a social conscience." She had been reading about social consciences in her monthly issue of *Trendy Therapeutics*. "How old is Forry now?"

Marie took a consoling sip of her third margarita. "He'll be nineteen come Thursday week. Really, Marie, at that age, you might think he'd grow up..."

This delinquent son, Forry, was at that moment on a farm in Idaho where he had gained temporary work, copulating in the back of the farmer's van with the farmer's hefty daughter, Joy-Jean.

"Oh, more, more," sighed Joy-Jean. "Oh god, but I love you, Forry! More, more!"

Forry gave her more.

10

The buggy had been christened "The Juppup." Darnley rejected the name as absurd. Its batteries were fully charged. It started easily and functioned as it should function. The buggy was built to hold two crew.

Darnley rode in it, going cautiously over the surface in a storm of

charged particles. Instruments told him he was on Latitude 14 degrees. Other instruments, as he had expected, indicated the existence of a thin atmosphere of molecular oxygen. He traveled westward, across the region known as Harpagia Sulcus, where the going was about as smooth as it ever could be on a world long peppered by planetoids and hurtling rock.

After fifty minutes of travel, he saw ahead the steep scarps of Regio, their serrated edges rising to over five hundred meters. This was where two blocks of the moon's crust slid against each other. Darnley stopped the vehicle. He viewed the desolation with complacency.

Over his right shoulder, he witnessed a striking auroral display, with color flickering amid what resembled folds of a seemingly gigantic curtain hanging low in the sky. The colorful folds changed as he watched.

Cause and effect were in operation. Ganymede unusually had a magnetosphere—the only satellite in the entire solar system to have one. It was contained within the greater magnetosphere of Jupiter, the parent planet. Atmospheric gases were colliding with charged particles at the north pole to create the remarkable effect of gloomy color.

Without altering his fixed expression, Darnley surveyed this artistic exhibition of natural phenomena.

When Darnley was back inside the craft that was now his home, he sent a message to UNISTE via sub-space.

"I would pity you people if I knew how. I think of the muddle in which you live, the entanglement of circumstance and emotion which is your diurnal habit. Here, far away at an unreachable distance, I am among a different order of things. Here logic prevails, the logic of a higher physics.

"I have resolved to build a new formulation for the universe, as did Isaac Newton before me. It will revolutionize all understanding—indeed, it may prove beyond the understanding of many. For this reason, I rid myself of the unwanted encumbrance of Glantaga's company. He was not fit to live amid the logic of the spheres as I do.

"You must prepare yourselves for revelation."

11

Samuel Wainscot Heath, President of the United States of America, had called together a conference of the learned to discuss the crisis brought about by the derisive messages from Ganymede.

James T. Braek, CoS of UNISTE, sat opposite him, accompanied by members of his staff, Tommy Bender and Monty Rastus Pennyfeather. Also present were members of Congress, the Director of Public Prosecutions, and a psychology professor from Harvard, Len Linctus Spagammi. Also present was a middle-aged woman, Mavis Prine, Senator for Popular Information.

"Anyone with any damned sense," the president, who prided himself on straight talk, was saying, "would dismiss these messages as the ravings of a deranged mind. Unfortunately, the public at large don't have any damned sense."

He caught a smirk on Tommy Bender's face and added, "Except when they had the good sense to elect me president. Well now, I intend to do something about this guy Darnley, and I want you to tell me what is best to do."

Silence fell over the group. Finally, David MacNamara, Director of Public Prosecutions, spoke up. "I am sure you realize that this man Darnley, by admitting to the murder of his fellow astronaut, has delivered himself into our hands."

"How do you make that out?" Tommy Bender asked. "Our hands, as you call them, are a tenth of a light year, or whatever that figure is, away from Darnley's throat!" He had recently been fined for illegal parking, which made him more than usually rude to the Public Prosecutor.

Everyone started talking at once, except for the professor from Harvard, who sat silent, his hands clasped together on the table in front of him.

Mavis Prine made her shrill voice heard, "Mr. President, we are unable to put Darnley under arrest, as he well knows. Perhaps his fellow crew-member, a Hilary Glantaga, may or may not have been murdered. But Darnley could murder whom he likes and we could do nothing about it."

"Surely he would murder who he *dislikes*," murmured Tommy Bender.

Mavis Prine continued, "I would figger Darnley would in either case claim to be the murderer, just to needle us further. Are not all his sub-casts attempts—for whatever reason—to needle us? Maybe in revenge for the living death to which we have sentenced him."

"That's all garbage, Mavis," said Braek, "If you don't mind me saying so. We sentenced Darnley to nothing. There was intense competition among our astronauts for this remarkable mission. Okay, so we can never get them back, even if they make it, but they all knew that and, notwithstanding, were prepared to die for their country and have their names forever enshrined in the Roll of Honor of our great country. As for—"

He was well-launched when the deep voice of Monty Rastus Pen-nyfeather broke in. "Yeah, okay, you maybe have a point, Mr. Braek, but let's not forget there was also a financial incentive. The families of these brave guys were to be looked after by the State forever."

"Only Darnley didn't have a fucking family," said Braek with a sneer.

"Now wait a minute, gentlemen," said the president. "Let's not get into an argument. Why do we reckon this lousy guy Darnley is doing this to us? Has being on Ganymede driven him mental?"

"Mr. President, Darnley isn't mental. He's got a new perspective on terrestrial affairs." Tommy Bender was speaking, conscious he was embark-

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ing on tendentious ground. "Why are the general public upset by his messages? Because there is a grain of truth in what he says. How can we shut him up when any give-away cell phone, any cheap laptop, can pick up his words? That's the problem, as I see it."

James T. Braek leaned over to Tommy to say in Tommy's ear, "You're speaking out of turn."

The president pointed a well-manicured finger at the professor from Harvard. "Okay, Professor Spagammi. Let's hear what you have to say."

Len Linctus Spagammi withdrew his hands to his knee.

"You say that this person, Raff Darnley, was chosen from among many candidates. Why did he draw the lucky straw? What are his qualifications? His mental qualifications in particular? If we knew that, we might discover a way in which he is vulnerable. We might find we had a weapon. A mental weapon to fight back against the slings and arrows he sends us.

"It's worth a try, surely."

12

Darnley awoke from a deep sleep. Sitting up, he said to himself, "What a peculiar dream! That's another shortcoming in the human phylogenetic code: the fact that we dream. Dreams serve no useful purpose.

"I have absolutely no moral qualms about the eradication of Glantaga. The triviality of his approach to life, the callow amusement he derived from computer games, all spoke against him. Why, he even played an updated Pac-Man!

"Yet, a new thought occurs to me. Supposing we individuals have psychic equivalents of Ganymede's magnetosphere. Let's call it a 'psychosphere,' the auroral effect of which stretches both behind and ahead of our present tense. So that our future may—unknown to us—influence our actions now.

"Suppose—to take the case of the wretched Glantaga—it was not his triviality that caused his death but rather his death that caused his triviality. Because a deep inward function of his psyche perceived that there was no future for him; thus, he retreated into those childish games.

"This concept of a psychosphere puts into question our whole understanding of cause and effect. I must think more about this. Perhaps I have stumbled on a dead end. Or maybe I venture toward the beginning of a totally new science. . . ."

The question preoccupied him all that day. He made notes on the computer. He even spoke to the android about it.

Wi110 said, "A human can be alive one moment and 'dead' the next. It seems such a small change of process, yet it is clearly important to him. Where does your hypothetical psychosphere go when you die?"

The day passed pleasantly in cogitation. The one alarming moment came after dark, when a particle storm blew up with surprising ferocity.

A banging came at the cabin window. Darnley looked up in shock from

the computer. There at the window was Glantaga, his face pressed against the metaglass. A terrible vengeful face it seemed, distorted by the eroding frosts and acids of Ganymede's surface, with flesh missing from the unkind bones of the countenance.

Darnley rushed to pull down the shutter to hide that awful grimace from view.

"He remains dead," said Will10. "He has not returned to be among the living."

"I know that, you fool! It's the wind, the damned wind that has blown his corpse back against the ship."

The android was unmoved by the rebuke.

"Later, I will chop Glantaga up and bury the parts deeply."

13

Joy-Jean had mighty muscles from the farm work, and glorious thighs. Forry much admired them. He stayed longer on the farm than he had intended. Sometimes, the farmer, beginning to trust him, ordered him to drive a truckload of prime porkers to market in the city, over a hundred miles away.

"Oh, how I miss you when you are gone," exclaimed Joy-Jean. "We will wed in the spring, darling Forry, and then always be together."

"Good," he said, taking flight.

It happened that the next time he drove to Alfaville City there was a traveling zoo in town. Forry went to see its owner, Diamond Jim Carson.

Carson was a big man with a big, black moustache, the two ends of which were entangled with his sideburns. He wore large check suits and rings on his fingers, the rings being encrusted with the diamonds that earned Carson his nickname.

"What makes you think I have a job for you, young feller?" he asked.

Diamond Jim Carson was staying at the Jubilee Hotel, the best hotel in Alfaville City. He had rented a suite of rooms on the top floor, overlooking Independence Boulevard. The suite of rooms had a bar and a pianola, with a big, red fire escape outside the window in case of fire.

"I'm a traveling man," said Forry, sticking his thumbs in the top of his chinos. "I admire your kind of life, Mr Carson. You take me on, I have a truck full of young porkers you could feed to your lions and tigers."

Carson rubbed the stubble on his jaw. "They ain't never tried porker meat to my knowledge."

Forry soon understood the truth of this remark. The lions and tigers in the traveling zoo were poor, undernourished critters. Once they had chased a living porker squealing round their cage and eaten him, they began to look much better.

The public of Alfaville City much enjoyed this new act and flocked to see it in their hundreds, taking their kids with them. The louder the kids cried, the more the animals seemed to enjoy their meal.

So Forry got the job. It was not too demanding, and once he had shov-

eled the manure into black bags his work was over for the day. Diamond Jim Carson took a liking to Forry, who had so increased his business. They spent the afternoon up in the zoo owner's suite, drinking and reading the racing papers.

They switched on the TV in time to hear President Samuel Wainscot Heath declaring in an interview in the White House that he was against cruelty to animals, and was determined to close down traveling zoos.

Carson, in a rage, jumped up from his comfortable chair, shaking his fist uncontrollably at the screen. His normally ruddy complexion turned to a rich scarlet.

"That jumped up cocksucker!" he exclaimed. "What does he know about traveling zoos? He'll be stamping out prostitution next!"

"He'd be thrown out of office if he did that," said Forry, with a contrasting pale face. He was ignored.

"Heath? I'll give him Heath! He only got in because the vote was rigged in Florida! What about the freedom of the individual? I ask you, what about it? If he ever came my way, I'd shoot the fucker!"

"Funny you should say that," said Forry. "He'll be driving through Alfaville City just next week, on his way to the Republican rally in Chicago."

This time, he was not ignored.

14

The president had appointed the psychology professor from Harvard, Len Linctus Spagammi, known to his colleagues as "Maggot," to head a team researching into Raff Darnley's early life and the influences that had made him shun human existence.

Spagammi came before the president in the Oval Office one fine Monday morning in October.

Coffee was served.

"This report," Spagammi began, "has entailed a great deal of research in the Public Records Office, in the State of Maryland District registers, in the—"

"I'm sure it has," said the president, interrupting. "Just give me the results, please, Professor."

"Very well. Rafferty Darnley was born in his mother's house in Woolscape, Maryland, on the first day of the new century. He weighed eight pounds, six ounces. His father had died some months previously.

"After a short while, his mother, Eustacia Darnley (née Barraclough), married again, and went to live in Richmond, Virginia. She there enjoyed a luxurious life which contrasted—"

"Yes, and the son?"

"Oh, little Rafferty was deposited on his grandmother, a Mrs. Alice Barraclough. Her husband had disappeared without trace. She was a cold woman in a cold house. The boy is shown none of the intimacy that parents ideally give. We have the impression of an unloved man.

"The Barraclough house is still standing. It is now a kind of guest

house. Our team enlisted the aid of the local police and we searched the place thoroughly. The destruction was purely accidental. Under one of the floorboards we discovered a notebook in which young Raff had kept a diary. I have it here."

Fishing in his well-filled briefcase, Spagammi handed over to the president a damp-stained bundle of paper. As it lay on the desk between them, he flicked open with his long bony fingers the title page. On the verso, in faded brown ink, an unpunctuated verse was inscribed:

Reside with no one
Practice persistence
Confide in no one
Keep your distance

"As you can see, Mr. President, these rules, drawn up by Raff when he was ten years old, were adhered to for the rest of his life.

"His enlisting with UNISTE, with its rigorous training, is entered into keenly but detachedly. He had to join a group while training, but remained withdrawn from his fellows.

"All his life, he gives the impression of being an unloved person. Unloved and unloving. A cold, in the vernacular, fish . . . Never enjoying the company of others, never desiring female company."

"Male company?"

"Never desiring any company. Very keen to become an astronaut, always keen to get away, to get to distant planets. His one hobby seems to have been the study of mathematics. He was generally disliked within UNISTE—and returned that dislike. . . .

"You will see, sir, that Darnley's life in general outline follows remarkably closely the life of the great Isaac Newton."

"Who's he?" asked the president, irritably.

Spagammi shook his head and sighed. "Newton ranks among the greatest scientists of all time. One of Newton's major works was the *Principia* of 1687. It describes the world subsumed under a single set of laws."

"That's a while ago, though, Professor."

"Mr. President, it is from the publication of that book of Newton's that modern scientific method begins to be rigorous, and leads eventually to space travel."

Samuel Wainscot Heath drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk. "That's it?"

"Very far from it, sir. I bring a number of documents and summaries for your scrutiny." The professor began to unload the contents of his briefcase.

"So are you claiming that this guy is nuts? What weapons does this investigation give us?"

Spagammi gave a little smile and a nod at the shallowness of the president's thinking. The president was not a Harvard man.

"A touch of Asperger's syndrome, undoubtedly. Not unusual. A dim cold view of human failings. Not unusual. A drive to travel through space. Not particularly unusual. A wish—"

"Okay, okay." President Heath rose to his feet. "So what are we left with?"

"A genius, maybe. Even his commander at UNISTE admitted Darnley was hell to deal with. Plenty of guys volunteered for the Ganymede trip

until they realized there was no way they could ever come back. Only Darnley. Only Raff Darnley. Oh, and Glantaga, rather immature, keen to follow where Darnley led."

The president had turned to gaze out of the long window at the rainy Washington scene. "We still have no motivation. So you say he was suicidal?"

Spagammi, unseen, gazed in resignation up at the ceiling. "I said no such thing. One thing that struck me—I guess it struck everyone—was that when the commander asked Darnley why he was prepared to travel that great distance, never to return, Darnley replied, 'The human species is just a farce.' The remark went all round the barracks in no time. Maybe Isaac Newton felt the same kind of thing.

"I often ponder about Isaac Newton. An extraordinary man . . ."

"You know," said the president, hands behind his back, still staring out of the window, uttering a memorable *non sequitur*, "I sometimes wonder how much longer I have to live. . . ."

15

There was much to be done on Ganymede.

Far from what he regarded as the farce of human society, Darnley was constructing a telescope as well as working on his psychosphere. The menial work of erecting the telescope could be left mainly to Willo. Besides, since the ghastly appearance of his dead fellow traveler at the window, Darnley felt less secure than he had done. He concentrated on working out the factors of psychospheres.

Isaac Newton before him had invented calculus (and told no one of his invention). Now Darnley found he had to develop a quantally higher calculus, which he named Calc². He was now able to formulate factors preceding death and date of death but, more than that, by keying in additional factors, place of death.

He was too weary after all his concentration to feel triumphant. But he knew he had uncovered a formula that would revolutionize human society. Much that had been regarded as chance, or even as the domain of psychoanalysts, could now be charted. There was a map through the convolutions of what had been merely casual.

The element of farce in human affairs was banished.

Darnley fell asleep beside his computer screen.

His sleeping hand accidentally pressed a tab.

The computer in its sweet female voice said, "Hi, your personal death will occur seven days and two hours six minutes from now. It will take place fourteen meters from this spot, when Jupiter is in the ascendant. You will die instantly. Thank you and have a good day. . . ."

Darnley awoke. Feeling groggy, he decided to take some exercise. Putting on the spacesuit, he went through the airlock and into the open. Jupiter was low over the ridges, about to set, casting a wan light on the

barren landscape. Many other interesting objects were wandering through the night sky in a business-like way. In particular, Callisto, the nearest satellite out from Jupiter to Ganymede, was bright in the sky. Half Callisto's face was in shadow; the other half glowed and twinkled.

Wi110 stood by the newly mounted telescope.

"Let's have a look at Callisto," said Darnley. The android moved politely out of the way.

Through the lenses, Callisto was clearly pocked by craters caused by impacts from asteroids, comets, and other bodies. Some of the shallow crater walls sparkled with frost in the dying Jupilight. Darnley stared at the small world with a kind of longing. Here was another world on which one might be alone; perhaps solitude itself would have a different quality on a different world.

He looked almost with a lover's gaze at the well-named Valhalla, a large impact basin now sinking into twilight. Perhaps, he was thinking, it might be possible to reactivate and repair his interplanetary craft, so that he might take a journey to Callisto.

And after that to volcanic Io, to beautiful Europa, with its fabulous oceans completely ceilinged by ice . . . To become himself one more satellite of the great and generous Jupiter . . .

A flash of light in Valhalla caught his eye. Definitely a flash—and then it was gone!

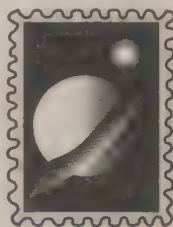
He thought with a surprised excitement that there might be a hermit like himself living there, escaping from humanity. To talk with such a man! To exchange theories . . . to build a new understanding. . . .

Then he realized that all he had seen was a small meteor striking Callisto's surface, the impact of collision engendering brief flame, like flint striking stone.

He turned away and went back into his craft.

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ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
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The main streets of Alfaville City, Idaho (or was it in Iowa?—Forry's father, Tommy Bender, could never remember) were bright with flags. The good old Stars and Stripes hung from every building along Independence Boulevard. And every building, every room, along that route had been searched for subversives on the dawn of the day that President Samuel Wainscot Heath would be driving along it in his motorcade, on the way to Chicago.

Diamond Jim Carson's suite had been searched. The two men who had searched the suite had been thorough. But they had also been about to go off duty for a beer and a long sleep after a strenuous stretch of night duty. They were not thorough enough. They did not look between Carson's two mattresses, where his AK-47 lay hidden.

It was now nine-thirty on a mild October morning. Carson and Forry had enjoyed a huge breakfast in the restaurant on the ground floor of their hotel. They would hardly have enjoyed their three eggs over-easy and slices of ham reared on the very farm from which Forry had escaped, where Joy-Jean lived and moved and had her being frustrated, if they had had the Laws of Psychospheres at their fingertips.

As they took the elevator up to their suite, crowds were massing outside, along the route, although the motorcade was not scheduled until eleven-forty. A band began to play in the Pleasure Park opposite.

"Love that tune," said Diamond Jim Carson as he retrieved his Kalashnikov from its hiding place. "What is it?"

"It's called 'I'll Be Seeing You.'" Forry informed him.

Carson gave a laugh as he polished the assault rifle. "And I'll be seeing *him*—him with his anti-zoo laws. This baby has put down a charging tusker. It can certainly stop Sam Wainscot Heath in his tracks!" He laughed throatily.

"I like your sense of humor, Mr. Carson, but I really don't think you should kill the President of the United States."

"There's no law against it."

"Oh, but there is, believe me. There's an electric chair against it." A slight shudder ran through Forry as he said these words, almost as if he had a prophetic feeling in his bones, as if something awful was about to befall him.

Time wore on. Carson ordered some Wild Turkey from room service—by coincidence the same beverage President Heath had enjoyed for his breakfast.

The band in the Pleasure Park switched from Cole Porter to patriotic airs. Time was eleven-thirty-eight. Diamond Jim Carson set down his glass, picked up his Kalashnikov, and moved to the open window.

"Please don't do anything rash, Jim," Forry begged. "Remember the words of the Constitution!"

"What words would they happen to be?" said Carson, without interest, peering through the sights along the boulevard. He saw car headlights glittering in the distance.

"I've forgotten, but you ought to remember them."

"Shut the fuck up, Forry," said Carson, not unkindly, as the motorcade drove into sight down the boulevard.

The crowds began to cheer. The cheers began in the distance and ran like a virus along the crowd, keeping well ahead of the limos.

The limos were traveling at a fair pace. The president sat in the third car. The roof was open and he was waving to his citizens.

He suddenly stopped waving and disappeared from view. Carson's bullet had got him right through the heart. The front car of the motorcade drove on a couple of hundred yards before stopping. The second car stopped after fifty yards. The third car, containing the already cooling body of the president, swerved onto the sidewalk and rammed the front of the Jubilee Hotel, squashing a pedestrian as it did so, causing blood to flow messily over the car's windscreen.

The pedestrian stopped screaming for good reason, but the crowd continued to put forth a united scream. The band lapsed into a funeral march and then ran out of steam. Hoping to calm the crowd, a single trumpeter started up with "Summertime, And the livin' is easy. . ."

Above the hubbub could be heard the sound of many hob-nailed feet pounding madly up the stairs of the Jubilee Hotel toward Carson's suite. It was clear that Carson had been spotted from below.

Carson was quicker-witted than could have been expected of a man of his bulk. He threw the AK-47 to Forry and jumped out of the window on to the fire escape. He was down the escape in a shot, just as the door of his suite burst open and one hundred and twenty Secret Service Agents—all armed—all angry—burst into the room.

There stood Forry, by the window, gun in hand. The picture of guilt.

He would have been gunned down instantly, but the agents were too tightly packed to be able to raise their arms high enough to fire. They were forced to arrest him instead.

The chief agent hung about till a TV crew got there, his proud hand grasping Forry's neck, a proud smile filling his own face.

"ALONE HE DID IT!" cried the headline of the *Alfaviile Albatross* next day, over their photo of the arrest.

Tommy and Marie Bender were watching *Sports Today with Toby Gray* on TV, each sprawling on one end or the other of their ivory white sofa.

The program was interrupted for an announcement. President Samuel Wainscot Heath had been assassinated at eleven-forty-one that morning. The entire nation was in grief.

"Thanks to smart police work, the murderer was caught while trying to flee. He was armed with an assault rifle that he fired into the crowd. His name has been given as Laurie Bender, of no fixed address. The president was rushed to the nearest hospital, but all attempts to revive him have failed. He is thought to be the victim of a Democrat or a Muslim plot.

"We'll keep you informed. For now, it's back to *Sports Today with Toby Gray*. And here is Toby. Have a good evening."

There had been a picture of Forry looking frightened, at which Marie Bender fell off the ivory white sofa in shock.

"My beloved son!" she cried.

Later, there was an interview with Joy-Jean on the farm. She sat weeping on a bale of hay. "I always knew he was a wrong'un," she said. "He forced his attentions on me. And he stole some pigs . . . I'm pregnant to prove it."

Earth's terrestrial events were of no interest to the solitary inhabitant of Ganymede.

Raff Darnley never heard the story of the assassination of an American president in Alfaville City, Idaho, or of the subsequent unfolding of events. Much more importantly, he was repairing the spacecraft for flight with the assistance of Wi110.

So he never learnt that Forry Bender, as he was strapped into the electric chair, uttered some last words which became instantly famous: "The human species is just a farce."

In Forry's hand he clutched a postcard received in his cell that very morning. It was postmarked from a seaside resort in Mexico and bore a photo of a bathing beauty, naked, but clutching a sombrero that covered her most interesting parts. On the back of the card were scribbled two words in a bold hand: "Sorry! Jim."

When the heat was turned on, the postcard burnt to ashes.

The execution and the vilification of their son broke up Tommy and Marie Bender's marriage. Each blamed the other for the neglect of their one and only.

Marie could hardly contain her grief and fled to Hollywood. Tommy's fate was almost as bad. He became a transvestite and went on TV talk shows. The satirical magazine, *As a Hatter*, proclaimed him "Gender-Bender Bender."

To all this tragedy Raff Darnley had long since turned away, indifferent to and indeed safe from human follies.

He had triumphed again. With the assistance of Wi110, he had repaired the landing gear and made the craft fit to travel once more.

He would soon fly, moving among all those great solemn bodies, admiring the logic of their movements and the ingenuity of their composition. He would have a close view of Sinope, the most distant of Jupiter's moonlets. He would partake of something beyond wisdom itself: creation, and the stern justice of creation. It would be his reward for the devising of the Laws of Psychospheres.

He walked out cautiously to have a final look around.

He was feeling very pleased with himself when a piece of asteroid little bigger than a steamroller, traveling at thousands of kilometers per hour, struck him. Wi110 found Darnley's remains in a shallow crater compounded mainly of slush, powdered lava, and frozen spikes of blood.

Wi110 conceived it his duty to subcast all of Darnley's data relating to the Laws of Psychospheres to Earth, to the offices of UNISTE.

The Laws made a greater impact on universal thinking than had all Isaac Newton's or Einstein's work.

From then onward, life on Earth was going to be different. Not better. Just different. ○

SCIENCE FICTION SUDOKU

This SF Sudoku puzzle, the subject of which was suggested by sudoku contest runner-up Ruth Crabtree, is solved using the letters ACELPRTSV. Place a letter into each box so that each row across, each column down, and each small nine-box square within the larger diagram (there are nine of these) will contain each of these letters. No letter will appear more than once in any row, column, or smaller nine-box square. The solution is determined through logic and the process of elimination. Beneath the puzzle is a set of eleven blanks. Rearrange the following letters for an SF concept: A, A, C, E, E, L, P, R, S, T, and V. The answers for the Sudoku puzzle and the anagram can be found beneath our classified ads on page 239. The solution to each puzzle is independent of the other. We've inverted the answer to the anagram so that you don't come upon it by accident.

T	V			R	E			
	P		S					E
		S			L	A		P
	L				C	T	V	
A				P				C
	S	C	E				L	
V		P	C			R		
S					T		P	
			V	A			S	L

Christopher Priest has published eleven novels, three short story collections, and a number of other books, including critical works, biographies, and children's non-fiction. His most recent novel *The Separation* won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the British Science Fiction Award. He has been nominated four times for the Hugo award and has won several other awards, including the Kurd Lasswitz Award (Germany), the Eurocon Award (Yugoslavia), the Ditmar Award (Australia), and Le Grand Prix de L'Imaginaire (France). In 2001 he was awarded the Prix Utopia (France) for lifetime achievement. His first story for *Asimov's* is one of two in this issue that features a subway system. In this tale, he wrestles with a nightmare that has infiltrated the thoughts of many daily commuters and plunges us into . . .

A DYING FALL

Christopher Priest

You are about to die. What will be the last thought to flash through your mind?

When his own final moment came to him, Marcus Birch realized at once what was happening. There was no doubt about it. Death struck him unavoidably, an appalling accident with an inevitable outcome. There was no time for fear or regrets or avoiding action or last-minute farewells. He simply experienced a feeling of disbelief and terror, and a total involvement with the accident.

You cannot prepare for death. That was the first thing Birch learned. It strikes without warning, a double blow—death and its accompaniment.

Death was to be expected, but it did not come alone. It brought with it one great and last illuminating thought, a vision of life, a summation and consummation. Birch had read of people who survived near-death experiences, speaking of the way their whole lives had seemed to run before them.

That was not what he experienced, on the day of his death, that last hour, that final minute, that culminating split-second. But a last thought did burst upon him. His vision consisted of a stretch of straight road glimpsed through the windshield of a car, the land bright with sunlight, traffic roaring along, beside him and in front of him. Although there were almost no identifying marks, Birch knew at once that he was in Belgium, driving at speed along a modern highway, and the mystery of the memory flooded into him.

Why should *this* be the last thought of his lifetime?

Why Belgium? When was this? Why should Birch, an Englishman living in London, think of Belgium?

How was he so sure? It was urgent that he understood.

Time slowed, time halted. The split-second expanded like a bloom flowering in the sunlight. The memory flashed in, came to rest, stayed there at the forefront of his mind and communicated the knowledge: "This is it. This is the end. This is what you will take to your grave, the climactic moment of your life."

In that instant of frozen introspection he was drawn irrevocably to the image that had appeared in his mind. He understood it, realized that it was like a single frame of film taken from a whole story. But the meaning of the story was a mystery! Birch hardly knew Belgium, had visited the country only once. Why should his life close with thoughts of a place he barely knew?

We are none of us ready to die, but even so we spend our lives knowing that the moment of dreaded departure will come. Most of the time we try not to think about it. We shrink from contemplating death, what it will mean. Death is the great blackness, and the only experience you take into death is the moment of dying.

Of course, death comes to us all in the end, the huge inescapable fact. Shakespeare died, Beethoven died, Einstein died, Rembrandt died, Churchill died. Their immortal abilities, their lasting influence on the world, were of no use to them as a way of warding off the moment of passing. Death does not discriminate with its horrors.

But did these great men think mysteriously of another country, as they breathed their last? Did Churchill dream inexplicably of Canada as he died, as Marcus Birch dreamt of Belgium as he died? Did Shakespeare without warning suddenly think of Italy?

Birch was not a great man, and he harbored no illusions that he might be. However, he too would from time to time wonder more prosaically about what his fate was going to be. It seemed likely that some kinds of death were more common or predictable than others—a car accident, a heart attack, pneumonia, old age, all these were familiar ways of dying, ones that could strike Birch as they struck most other people. Other fates

were more personal, the ones that everyone in a sense designs for himself. We all make choices, and avoid others. Birch was no different.

He discounted many possibilities. He felt it unlikely, for instance, that he would die in the frozen catastrophe of an avalanche, or under the lava-flow from a volcano, or in a hail of machine-gun bullets in a gangland shooting, or from the bite of a rabid animal, or in the clutching hands of a strangler. Or in many other exotic or unusual ends. His life as a middle-aged Londoner did not expose him to those dangers.

But respiratory illness: now that was a possibility. Birch had suffered from bronchitis when he was a child, he took up smoking when he was a teenager, and he had smoked for years before finally quitting. So what kind of mortal ending would that lead him to? He imagined himself dying in his own bed, struggling for breath, his heart laboring, his thoughts becoming vague, while anxious relatives surrounded him. In this fanciful end his pallid hands would lie on the starched sheets, while his frail head would be propped on linen pillows. He would be old, of course, exceedingly old, so old that life would no longer matter to him. If images of Belgium loomed in the last moment, he would barely notice.

Other illnesses would be similar. Hospital beds, sickbeds, visitors, the physical degradations of terminal disease. All of these he could imagine, and even expect. None of them seemed likely to include a motorway in Belgium.

Perhaps instead he would choke on food—he always talked too much when he was eating, and his wife said he ate too fast anyway. He imagined a half-chewed morsel of steak lodging in his windpipe, a piece of pasta, a lump of cheese, a crust of bread. Choking, he would fall to the floor, struggle pitifully for a while, then expire.

Or drink. How much alcohol had he drunk in his life? And how much more was there to come (because he had no intention of giving it up)? He wondered about cirrhosis, pancreatitis, dementia, kidney disease, heart failure. He disliked the prospect of all of them, although there was always the saving thought, or perhaps it was a delusion, that terminal agonies might be cushioned by a bottle or two in the last hour.

Transport accidents: he drove his car a lot, he was often on trains, he flew three or four times a year. Anything was possible. A traffic accident on a motorway?

And his own particular danger-of-choice: Birch had taken up free-fall parachuting when he was twenty and still single. For two decades afterwards he gave up all his spare time to this expensive hobby. Every spring, summer and fall he spent most weekends taking headlong leaps from high-flying aircraft, plummeting toward the map-like ground so far below. It was an exhilarating pastime, addictive, endlessly exciting and rewarding.

Dangerous too. He often heard of accidents happening to other parachutists, a fact that gave an undoubted extra thrill to every jump. Although there was little risk of harm so long as you fell freely through the sky, there always came the moment when it was necessary to tug on the rip-cord and trust to the saving billow of the parachute, cracking open in

the air above you, slowing your mad dive, lowering you in a more controlled way towards the ground.

Perhaps once he might have wondered if that strenuous, thrilling hobby might signal the personal fate awaiting him, but in the end there was no danger. By the time Birch reached the age of forty his children were in secondary school and his wife had not been in full-time employment since before they were born. Marcus Birch was the sole breadwinner and there was no family money to spare. Free-fall parachuting was a luxury he could no longer afford, and since his mid-thirties he had visited the airfield less and less often. In the end parachuting went out of his life as easily as it had arrived. It might once have been a risk to him, but it was no more.

Not one of these deaths was to happen to him. It appeared to involve Belgium.

So Marcus Birch lived his ordinary life, whose outer appearance was no different from that of any other man, until he was forty-five. He was early middle-aged, his hair was starting to go grey (but only a few strands), and his stomach was a little plumper than he would have liked (but nothing that could not be swiftly slimmed down by sensible eating and exercise). His general health was good, his work and home life were stable and contented. He loved his wife. His children, now in their late teens, had settled down at their universities. He was free of worries.

One evening in this unconcerned life he was standing on the platform of a tube station, deep beneath the center of London. He was about to cross from one side of town to the other. He was keeping his distance from the pressing crowds by listening on his iPod to Clara Haskil, the Rumanian-born concert pianist, playing Mozart's ninth piano concerto. It was by modern standards an old performance, before cassette tapes, before CDs, before downloads. Haskil had recorded the concerto in 1958, not long before her sudden death. In spite of its age the transfer was perfect, and it was a sensitive, atmospheric rendition, a personal favorite of his.

But Haskil's playing was not at the forefront of his mind. As he waited for the next train to pull in he was thinking about the meeting he was heading for, unworried about the future. It was a warm evening, the meeting would be short, he would be seeing some friends for a drink afterwards, and the train was signaled to arrive within a minute.

While he waited he looked along the railway lines, staring down at the shallow cavity that had been created between the rails and beneath the sleepers. As in every underground station in London, this trench, an emergency measure to help protect anyone who fell or leapt from the platform, was filled with the mess of rubbish—plastic bottles and cardboard cartons and loose papers.

The second movement of the concerto ended. Clara Haskil fingered the first notes of Mozart's finale, the *Rondo*. The familiar refrain swelled in his earphones. He felt the customary rush of warm air belching out of the tunnel into the station, as the train approached from the distant darkness. The litter between the rails moved with the wind. The great rumbling of the wheels grew louder.

He glanced towards the opening of the tunnel, saw the front of the train rushing alongside the platform, heard the rising screech of brakes and wheels as the train slowed down to pick up the waiting passengers.

Behind him someone moved suddenly, pushing against his lower back, and catching him off-balance. He turned, trying to steady himself, but his foot slipped. He began to topple to the side.

The motion had spun him around so that he was facing the oncoming train. He was tipping over as he fell, away from the platform, stiff with fear above the rails, angling down, unstoppably tumbling.

He could see the train, five meters away, three meters away. Clara Haskil played on as if nothing had changed. Over the orchestra and piano, Birch could hear the screaming of the train. The driver was at the controls, one arm thrown up above his eyes, the other pressing frantically against something on the panel in front of him, trying to ward off the man he saw toppling before him, trying to stop the train in the impossibly short distance that remained.

Then, in the final split-second before the train struck him, Marcus Birch saw a vision of Belgium.

He was in Belgium. He was on a divided highway, inside a car, driving at high speed. A sign went by, indicating Bruxelles and Liège, and Brussel and Luik, and other places whose names he either did not recognize or did not have time to read. Everything had two names.

The experience of the vision was a shock: shockingly real, clear, actual, immediate. Brilliant, hot sunshine, the roar of the traffic outside, the passing trees and the fleeting glimpses of fields and houses.

Birch allowed the vision to continue, trying to understand what he was seeing or what he might be doing. He looked around at where he was sitting. Yes, he was in a car. It was his own car, a Renault, one he had owned many years before. He remembered that Renault well. He remembered buying it, using it for three or four years, selling it when it was time for another.

He stayed with the image, letting it flow seamlessly around him. He wondered how long this final remaining fragment of his life might last. Would it be possible to sit here forever, watching the Belgian highway unfurling before him, endlessly putting off the moment when he would have to let himself go back, back to be crushed by the train?

Time appeared to be frozen, so the frozen time gave him long enough to think.

This, he knew now, was based on a memory, a fleeting, distant memory of a visit he had made a quarter of a century before. He was in his early twenties and was driving down to southern Germany, where he was planning to visit some friends. His route from Calais led him down the west side and through the south of Belgium: Bruxelles, Liège, Verviers, across the Ardennes.

That thought made the image change, in a flash of different light and scenery. The road still lay ahead, but now it was narrower and the traffic noise was less. Ahead, to his right and left, were tree-covered hills. The lush Ardennes landscape rolled away endlessly on either side. He saw a

road sign to Spa, and another to Malmédy. The border with Germany was not much further ahead. The road signs were in French alone.

The vision changed again, with another jolt of shifting perspective. Now he was on a country road, with tall trees planted along each side, farmland spreading away. A town lay ahead: he could see houses, a church spire, small businesses beside the road. Cars were moving slowly, as was his—he saw people riding bicycles.

A sign said the place was called Saint-Vith.

Instantly, he recognized and remembered the name. Instantly, the memory changed again.

He was out of the car, standing on a grassy slope. He was in a forest clearing, with trees growing on all sides. He was not alone.

He looked around at the scene. There were about a dozen other young men and women, standing in an orderly semi-circle, watching him. A harness was tied around his chest, running up behind his shoulders, and with broad leather straps looped between his thighs to support his weight. He glanced upwards. A gantry built of dull-grey tubular steel supported the pulleys for the harness. The two ropes were taut, but not restraining him.

There was a young, fierce-looking man standing beside him, his arms and legs braced aggressively.

"This is how to fall!" he shouted at Birch.

He was wearing grey camouflage pants and shirt, which fit him like well-cut military fatigues. He stepped away from Birch, half-turned, then fell suddenly to the ground. His body rolled easily and smoothly, like that of a trained athlete. Immediately he was on his feet again, springing upright, standing in front of Birch, exactly as he had been before. It was like a loop of film, replaying.

"This is how to fall!" he shouted. "Make your arms and legs pliable! Let the momentum take you as you hit the ground!" He turned away and fell swiftly to the ground, his body rolling easily on the rough turf. With the same lithe movement as before, he came springing upright and stood beside Birch.

"This is how to fall!" he shouted again. "Relax your muscles, but prepare for the impact!"

He turned away to demonstrate once more, dropping athletically to the ground, breaking his fall, spreading the impact, then leaping to his feet with an easy strength.

"That is how to fall!" he shouted at Birch again. "Now you try it!"

To Birch's amazement the harness tightened around him, and he was swept two or three meters into the air. Dangling on the ropes he swung to and fro, spinning slowly.

Remembering, remembering . . .

This was a course in parachuting in which he had enrolled when he first became interested in free-falling. He had made it part of his trip to Germany, all those years ago. He had interrupted his journey at Saint-Vith to spend three days in a training camp in this forest clearing, situated in the hills outside the town. In the world of parachuting the Saint-Vith course was considered the best: every free-fall parachutist he'd met

had told him to train there if he possibly could. He had come to Belgium to learn the technical skill of landing on the ground at the end of a parachute descent without breaking any bones.

So he remembered.

The gantry released him. He crashed to the ground. His supple body took the impact, while the momentum rolled him across the grassy floor of the clearing.

"This is how to fall!" the instructor shouted at him again, as the memory looped. The harness raised him, spinning him in the air. He was released. His body fell rapidly to the earth. In a reflex he loosened his body, raised his knees to take the first shock of impact, let his limbs relax. He clouted the ground, but rolled easily and painlessly across the uneven turf.

"This is how to fall!" the instructor shouted at him again and again. Birch landed repeatedly on the hard ground, rolling easily with his limbs relaxed, never hurting himself.

The memory went no further. He was hoisted into the air, he swung around, he plummeted to the ground, he landed and rolled, leapt again to his feet.

He believed he could spend eternity in that rondo, replaying the memory with its subtle variations, the frozen image that came to him in the split-second before he was killed.

He was terrified of the alternative, the reality behind this false image, this hopeless, despairing glimpse of memory, clinging to life. So he swung and fell and landed and rolled, then swung again, fell again, landed and rolled, putting off the moment of dying . . .

Then he was back in grim reality, falling again, swinging again out from the edge of the railway platform beneath the streets of London. His body was stiff and defensive, braced against the imminent pain, toppling out over the electrified track, in front of the rushing train, his arm raised uselessly to try to break the impact.

The train, brakes screeching, hammered unstoppably towards him.

Remembering, he relaxed his outstretched arm, loosened the muscles of his back, let his legs become pliable. The direction of his fall altered immediately. Instead of swinging out stiffly like a pole across the metal tracks, he dropped more directly downwards, vertically, a much quicker fall.

He landed heavily against one of the rails, felt agonizing pain as his head crashed against it. One of the front wheels, locked solid in a spasm of emergency braking, was slewing towards him with white-hot sparks flying around it.

He thumped down, a pliant body, rolling with the momentum into the emergency trench beneath the rails. The train roared over him, a hell of shattering noise and vibration. He was in total darkness, his entire body paralyzed by pain.

There it ended for him.

There in the clearing in the Belgian forest it had also ended, many

years ago, but with a broken ankle and a sarcastic instructor, unsympathetically yelling at the next trainee to put on the harness. Marcus Birch lay on the uneven ground, both hands reaching down to grip the agony of his ankle, his face and arms white and strained, trying to look as if it didn't matter, in front of the other men and women, under the harsh manner of the instructor.

Someone eventually called for an ambulance and in the hospital he was treated well and efficiently. He traveled home from Belgium by train a few days later, hobbling on crutches, full of regrets and the humiliated anger of having had to abandon the course before it properly started. The face of the instructor, his expression hard and his eyes narrowed with impatience, haunted him for days. The plaster did not come off for several weeks, and that ankle was weaker than the other for the next two years.

While his leg was mending he was unable to return to the free-fall parachuting club, and by the time he was walking normally again he had lost all interest in the activity. He never went back.

Birch huddled in the littered, filthy space between the rails as the train came to a final halt. Somewhere out there in the main part of the station there was a racket of shouting voices, warnings, yelled instructions, people screaming, footsteps running away. Closer in, around him in the darkness beneath the train, was a deep silence. Even closer, pressed into his right ear, was the remaining earpiece. The iPod was still working.

He was not dead, but later they said at the hospital that he came as close to it as anyone they had ever seen. Both his legs were broken, one of his arms. His left hand had been severed by the train's wheel. A hip was broken, also his pelvis. There were cuts, grazes, and bruises all over him. He was in pain so deep and extensive that he simply lacked the words to describe what he felt—in any event, he was sedated for many days and remembered almost nothing of his first period of slow recovery.

The iPod was still working, the one remaining earphone clinging on somehow. In the years ahead he often played again the final movement of that Mozart concerto, the *Rondo*. The familiar refrain, endlessly repeated, was a way of holding on to his moment of saved life, the postponement of the inevitable. He loved Clara Haskil's interpretation, her delicate musician's touch, the sublimely fluid notes of the concerto, the reworked phrases, the repetitions, the subtle variations, her dying fall. ○



THE GOLDEN RECORD

Ian Creasey

Ian Creasey was born in 1969, and by the time he grew old enough to become interested in space, the moon landings were already history. "Throughout my childhood, the big story in space exploration was the Voyager mission to the outer solar system—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune. There's a special romance about the first close-up pictures of a new world, each with its own moons and rings and quirks. And so, when I needed an iconic space probe as the basis for a short story, Voyager 2 loomed as large in my mind as it had all those years ago, when I first grew interested in space and science fiction."

With a grimace of distaste, Andrew unwrapped another granola bar. Back on Earth, it had seemed a good idea to stock his ship with extremely dull food. Otherwise, spending months in space—with nothing to do but write up his thesis—would just make him balloon in weight. Yet now he had the opposite problem. The ship kept telling him he needed to eat, but the "no added sugar" cereal bars looked as appetizing as beige polystyrene. Andrew gazed longingly at the single red packet behind the healthy rations, but he was saving that until—

A chime rang through the tiny cabin. "Object detected," said the ship. The wallscreen displayed a starscape, highlighting one infinitesimal speck.

Andrew reached for the chocolate, but then drew his hand back. It might simply be a comet infalling from the Oort cloud.

"Spectroscopic analysis suspended," the computer's baritone voice said. "Object displays powered trajectory."

Another ship. Andrew threw his granola bar against the wallscreen in annoyance. But just in case they were legitimate, he had to hail them.

"This is the salvage ship *Yesteryear*, with World Polity registration 36971C. I'm Andrew Pitt of the Houston Spaceflight Museum. Please identify yourself."

No response came. Andrew hadn't expected one from a scavenger.

Throughout the ages, archaeologists had always had to compete with looters, collectors, and self-styled rightful owners.

"Where are they going?" he asked.

"No obvious target," replied the computer. "Thrust is low: 5 percent gee."

Like Andrew, they were still sweeping the sky. "Can you backtrack their course?"

A dotted line appeared on the starscape, widening into a cone of uncertainty.

"Assume they've already searched along their path," Andrew said. "Then redefine our sweep to exclude that sector."

He felt a gentle pressure as the *Yesteryear* veered to a new trajectory. The thrust slowly pulled the floating granola bar to the floor.

Andrew stared at the screen, willing the *Yesteryear*'s scopes to find a blip. The hunt reminded him of boyhood days spent metal-detecting, finding nickels and dimes as obsolete as the nation that minted them. Somewhere out there lay Voyager 2, one of the earliest space probes. If the scavenger reached it first, months of eating dried apricots would have gone for nothing—and another piece of history would be lost to the public. The Spaceflight Museum had very few twentieth century artifacts, most of which had never gone beyond Earth orbit. All the Moon buggies and Mars landers had long since been snapped up by private collectors, hoarded away from the public's gaze.

Since Voyager 2 had been funded by taxpayers' money, Andrew believed it should be in a public museum where the taxpayers could see it. The scavengers were nothing more than thieves.

Salvaging the probe would also look good in his thesis. Indeed, if he didn't succeed in capturing Voyager, there was very little else he could include. The end of exploration meant that space history was a finite resource, over which collectors and museums squabbled like outmoded oil barons scrambling for the dregs.

Archives containing Voyager 2's post-Neptune trajectory had recently been rediscovered, after being lost in the environmental disasters that led to the birth of the World Polity. However, two centuries of gravitation from planets and comets—along with any propellant leakage or meteor impacts—could have pulled Voyager off-course. Not that it was going anywhere in particular, with its mission long since complete. The solar system had now been fully explored, and half of it colonized.

Yet beyond the Kuiper belt, civilization faded like the pale pinprick Sun. Here, billions of kilometers from home, Andrew and his rival played another boyhood game: finders keepers.

Waves lapped at Andrew's chair, as the hiss of distant rain echoed across the cabin. The illusory ocean helped mitigate claustrophobia. A crack of thunder woke Andrew from his doze. "Possible match for Voyager 2 detected," the computer said. "Object is drifting within predicted parameters."

With a speeding heart, Andrew checked the spectroscope. Its analysis showed iron, titanium, and all the other telltale elements of an artifact.

"Let's get over there! Optimum trajectory for pickup and return to Earth."

The ship's acceleration felt all too feeble. "Time to pickup?" he asked.

"Twenty-nine hours," said the computer. "The other ship is changing course," it added.

The scavenger must have spotted the *Yesteryear* abandoning its search pattern, and drawn the obvious conclusion. Gnawing his nails—they tasted better than the granola bars—Andrew asked, "Time for other ship to reach Voyager 2?"

"Twenty-seven hours."

Andrew nearly bit his fingertips off as he ground his teeth in frustration. "Recalculate," he said. "Optimize for shortest time to pickup, even if getting to Earth takes longer."

He could use more fuel in accelerating to Voyager, and get there sooner, but he'd also require more fuel to decelerate so he could salvage the probe. That would leave him less for getting back to Earth. Ultimately, food and oxygen would be the constraints on the final leg.

"Delay course change," he said.

When Andrew speeded up, the scavenger might simply do the same. Right now, the other guy thought he had the upper hand. If he kept on thinking that, maybe he'd grow complacent. Maybe he'd fall asleep. Maybe a flotilla of pigs would fly past the *Yesteryear's* scopes.

Andrew played a history-sim for a while, taking the role of Wernher von Braun, but he couldn't concentrate and ended up getting shot by the Nazis as he tried to defect to the Allies.

Hours and a nap later, Andrew made his move, then waited anxiously to see how the scavenger would respond. It all depended on how much fuel each spaceship had. At least no one had shot at him—yet. The *Yesteryear* was unarmed, like most small spacecraft. Andrew could only hope the collector had a similar vessel.

"The other ship is accelerating," said the computer. "Projections suggest it will reach the target before us."

"Ah hell," said Andrew. "What if I get out and push?"

"You would be burned by our exhaust," the computer chided.

If the other ship had more fuel than *Yesteryear*, there was very little Andrew could do. His course was already optimal. He had to be able to pick up Voyager 2, then get back to Earth. Or—

"Where's the nearest friendly habitat?" he asked.

"The World Polity has a scientific outpost on Triton," said the computer.

"Set new course: shortest time to pickup, then to Triton afterward."

Again Andrew endured an anxious wait for the scavenger's response. And again the other ship accelerated. It was still going to beat him to Voyager. Only by fifteen minutes, but that was enough.

Andrew pounded his fists on the body-molded chair. "What's that guy driving? A ship made entirely from fuel?"

"Spectroscopic data indicates the other ship is not made entirely from fuel," said the computer.

Andrew had run out of options. Well, instead of getting home he could use all his fuel reaching Voyager 2 first. But then it would take weeks for anyone to rescue him, and the museum would receive a huge bill, which the directors would probably take out of his salary in monthly installments till he died.

He wasn't going to give up. Maybe the scavenger ship was just trying to fake him out, setting a thrust that it couldn't maintain. Andrew vowed to chase all the way, waiting for any slip.

Hours passed. The other ship began decelerating, on a course optimized to match Voyager 2's slow crawl to the stars. The scavenger had to stop to collect his booty, of course. Andrew's trajectory had been calculated to do the same, but he would get there too late.

And then Andrew thought, *What if I don't stop?* He could get to Voyager first. Sure, he wouldn't be able to pick it up. But maybe he could do something.

"Recalculate course to arrive one minute before the other ship, at lowest possible speed relative to Voyager."

Now he had to pray that the scavenger thought he was just bluffing. Partly it *was* a bluff—Andrew had no idea whether his plan would work. But it was the only chance he had.

The other ship continued decelerating toward Voyager 2. The *Yesteryear*, maintaining velocity, approached faster. On the wallscreen, the target blip swelled into a metallic hulk. Andrew tensed with excitement as he saw the ancient craft, its antenna still faithfully pointing back to the distant Sun. Then he shivered as he saw the scavenger closing in.

Andrew opened the salvage bay doors and extended the magnetic grapples. "Stand by for maximum power," he said. "Intercept as close as possible without impact."

The cabin lights dimmed as high-grade magnets attempted to pluck Voyager from the sky.

"Lock failed," said the computer.

Andrew shouted curses into the void.

"Target has acquired momentum," the computer went on. "The other ship is changing course."

"Slow down! We must be able to get there first." The screen showed Voyager 2 tumbling along in a new trajectory. The scavenger ship pursued close behind.

"Warning—remaining fuel margin will be negligible. Confirm course change?"

"Confirmed!"

Yesteryear braked, then turned to angle the salvage bay for pickup. Andrew nudged power into the grapples, coaxing Voyager nearer. He couldn't pull too hard, or the probe would slam into the back of the hold. Voyager 2 glided slowly inside. The scavenger ship approached so closely that Andrew could imagine the occupant waving his fists. No markings showed who owned the ship or where it came from.

A clang reverberated through *Yesteryear* as the salvage bay doors slammed shut. "We've got it! Set course to Triton, best speed."

Andrew fell back into his seat under the acceleration. He checked the grapples to make sure they still secured Voyager. Reassured, he reached into the galley for the single red packet at the back of the cupboard. Weeks of granola bars and dried fruit lay ahead, but now he savored his celebratory chocolate.

After licking his lips, his fingers, and the inside of the packet, Andrew

sent a message to Earth confirming he'd salvaged Voyager 2. Then he donned a pressure suit to inspect his prize. The hold was still in vacuum, and Houston's conservation experts would carefully examine the craft before reintroducing it to atmosphere.

The silver gleam that shone out from old pictures had been dulled by centuries of micrometeorite impacts. As often happened with objects designed for the weightlessness of space, Voyager looked ungainly in the acceleration-defined up and down of the *Yesteryear's* interior. Thinking like the curator he hoped one day to be, Andrew wondered which could be called the bottom of the craft, and which the top. Standard displays usually showed a probe standing on its propulsion system, but a dynamic angle sometimes looked more impressive, albeit requiring discreet supports for the nose and antenna.

Andrew descended for a closer look. On the craft's torso he noticed the Stars and Stripes logo, familiar from the museum's oldest exhibits. Captions in the twentieth-century wing explained the badge of the former United States of America.

A glint drew his eye to the antique disk, the Golden Record, that described Voyager and humanity to any aliens who might happen along. Andrew knew what the disk contained—though conspiracy theorists disagreed—but he still goose-pimpled at the sight of the primitive artifact, whose analog grooves predated the digital age.

As he gently clasped the probe's dull grey metal, Andrew felt the triumph of possession, a satisfied acquisitive lust. Of course, Voyager belonged to the museum, and would go on public display. But right now it was his. Even through the suit's glove, he could easily imagine that he reached across the centuries, touching the past. It was inspiring to think how successful the original mission had been, and how the early pioneers had led to today's spaceships, capable of salvaging the ancient efforts and bringing them back home.

Andrew returned to the cabin, where he diluted his emotions to the dry academic level required for another two thousand words of his thesis.

Three weeks later, a message arrived from Earth. The relict United States of America in Exile, from its base in Hawaii, was suing for the return of Voyager 2. They'd obtained an injunction to hold the craft in escrow pending a full hearing.

Andrew laughed. The former USA, a souvenir shop masquerading as a nation-state, had no political status, having long been superseded by the World Polity. They couldn't be Voyager's rightful owners . . . surely?

Yet if they won, he had just spent months salvaging for the scavengers.

Andrew tried to fake some warmth as he greeted his visitor, a tall middle-aged woman dressed in a style of business suit he recognized from twentieth-century archive footage.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "I'm Andrew Pitt." Having just earned his PhD—thanks to his thesis on Voyager—he barely refrained from saying "Dr." before his name, although he'd included it on his business cards.

"Belinda Johnson," she said, giving him a firm handshake. "Attorney General of the United States of America."

Andrew suppressed a smile. "That appears to be the first problem. The United States doesn't actually exist, does it?"

"It exists in our hearts," she said, pouring cream into her coffee, "and in the monuments it created. It endures as an ideal of freedom, progress, and discovery."

Andrew sprinkled a light dusting of chocolate on his own drink. "Practicing your rhetoric for the jury? We invited you here to ask whether you'll settle out of court. Frankly, we have a limited budget and we could do without the hassle. But we'll fight if we have to."

"You had enough budget to go out and steal Voyager 2."

"It wasn't theft. I had a salvage license under the Artifacts and Monuments Act."

"The US government has passed no such act. Voyager 2 is our property. We don't recognize the jurisdiction of the so-called World Polity."

This time Andrew didn't bother suppressing his smile. "I think the boot is on the other foot. The World Polity doesn't recognize the United States, any more than it recognizes the Roman Empire." He turned to the wallscreen of his office, where the museum's legal AI supervised the conversation. "Isn't that right?"

The AI said, "Current legal consensus is that the World Polity only recognizes the United States as a registered trademark and advertising slogan of the United States of America in Exile, LLC, which is incorporated in Hawaii with the declared aims of educating the public and campaigning for a restoration of the United Nations and the sovereign powers of its constituent nation-states." Being a computer, it said all that without pausing for breath.

Never ask a lawyer for a short answer, Andrew reflected, *not even an AI lawyer*. The AI, monitoring on behalf of the museum directors, would intervene anyway if he fouled up.

"I've been to Hawaii," Andrew said to his guest. "Your little toy nation is an excellent exhibit. I've nothing against the United States as a historical entity—I bought a Stars and Stripes at the Congress souvenir shop. By putting Voyager 2 on display, we're celebrating America's great heritage. Why are you giving us so much grief over this?"

"Lots of reasons." Ms. Johnson spoke forcefully with great speed, as if there were so many reasons she might not get them all out. "Quite apart from the political angle, we object to the way you describe this as 'heritage' and put it in a museum. The Voyagers represent an age of discovery and hope. When the United States was at the height of its power, it had a golden record of exploring new frontiers in space. What has the World Polity done? Stopped exploration, and put all the space probes in museums. What does that say about the modern age?"

"It says that the solar system is fully explored, so the job's finished."

"The job is *not* finished—it has barely begun! The World Polity should be sending out ships to explore the stars. Instead it wastes money on the likes of you."

Andrew wanted to say that the World Polity mostly wasted money on things like food and medicine for the world's population. When the United States was at the height of its power, spending its money on space exploration, most of the world had lived in abject poverty, starvation, and disease. But he didn't want to antagonize his guest any further. He had to persuade her to settle, not start a political argument with her.

"It's not in my power to force the World Polity to send out starships.

And no judge would order such an outcome, even if you won.” Andrew didn’t ask for AI confirmation, not desiring another lecture on the current legal consensus. “What do you actually want?” he asked. “What would it take for you to settle?”

“What we want—” Ms. Johnson paused, and Andrew had the impression that she didn’t want to settle at all, but was determined to go to court for the sake of the publicity. “As you say,” she went on, “not everything we want is within your power. This whole museum is built on our sovereign territory, which we’re demanding back. Houston used to be the center of the United States’ space effort, you know.”

Andrew did know. He had a doctorate in the history of space exploration to prove it.

Ms. Johnson said, “First and foremost, we want the return of Voyager 2. We’re sick of you stealing our space probes from the sky and putting them in museums. You’re like the old anthropology museums who used to put native bones on display, regardless of how the natives’ descendants felt about it.”

Andrew sighed. “We’re a spaceflight museum. Our whole purpose is to display this stuff. I really don’t think the directors will agree to pack it all in, stop educating the public, and go home.” *Particularly if it means we all lose our jobs*, he thought. What other job could he get with a PhD in space history? “You’re only picking on us as a soft target,” he said. “What about all the collectors?”

“I’m not very happy with them either,” Ms. Johnson admitted. “But some of our Congressmen approve of them as free market entrepreneurs. Your museum, on the other hand, is funded by the World Polity.”

“And that makes us the bad guys, in your quaint world-view,” said Andrew. “The whole space program was founded on your hatred of the bad guys, wasn’t it?”

“If we hadn’t defeated the Russians and the Muslims, there wouldn’t be much of a world to have a World Polity on,” she said. “If you want to talk history, that’s history. But space exploration isn’t history—at least, it shouldn’t be. Your captions and catalogs, your interactive timelines: they all say that exploration came to a stop last century. Why can’t it be a pause, a temporary lapse? Why can’t your displays be open-ended and look to the future, the future we need to build?” She spoke passionately, almost spilling her coffee as she gestured to the stars on his ceiling-scape.

“You really care about this,” Andrew said with surprise. He had expected her to spout legal jargon and political propaganda, not enthuse about space.

“I’m surprised you don’t,” said Ms. Johnson. “Doesn’t it worry you that exploration has finished? What will you do when you run out of history, when all the space probes have been collected and displayed like fossils?”

“It’s a fair point,” Andrew conceded, remembering how desperate he’d been to find one of the last few uncollected probes for his doctorate. “But I can’t magic up a faster-than-light drive to satisfy your dreams of manifest destiny. And if you really care, why aren’t you doing something more constructive than just harassing museums?”

“We are. We aim to re-establish the United States: ideally on Earth, but in space if necessary. I’ve just come back from the outer system, scouting

locations. But one airless rock is much like another. In the longer term, we need a proper world with wind and rain and wild rolling hills. It's not called the Stars and Stripes for nothing—we want the stars."

"Just returned from the outer system, eh?" said Andrew. "I met a scavenger ship out there."

"Did it have a US flag?" said Ms. Johnson.

"No, of course not," he said. *Who'd fly a flag while looting?*

"Then that ship wasn't ours. But Voyager 2 carries the flag, because Voyager is ours."

"Not according to my salvage license, it isn't. We can't give you the stars, and we can't give you Voyager 2. Not permanently—it's museum property."

Andrew paused and leaned forward, to emphasize the concession that he hoped would persuade her to settle. "But there's always the possibility of a long-term loan. Once we've had it on display here for a few months, we could ship it over to Hawaii. You could put Voyager in the US exhibition, along with your Constitution and other knick-knacks. . . ."

His voice trailed off in the face of Ms. Johnson's thunderous expression.

"We won't accept the 'loan' of our rightful property," she said. "And I'm amazed you'd make such an insulting offer. I looked you up before I came—you were born in New York, weren't you?"

Andrew nodded warily.

"So you're American. What happened to your patriotism? How can you support the World Polity against the land of your birth?" Her rehearsed tone made Andrew suspect she said this to everyone.

He shrugged. "Before the United States, this continent was controlled by Europeans, and before them by the Native Americans. I could ask you why you're not campaigning for the British Empire. Why do you expect me to feel any loyalty to a temporary political unit on a particular chunk of land? We live on a single planet. We all breathe the same air and use the same ecosystems, the same data-net. The nation-state model"—Andrew reached for a metaphor, and found it in the museum around him—"was like a spaceship with different governments in the engine-room, the medical bay, and the life-support systems. It didn't make any sense, and that's why it collapsed."

"No, it collapsed because of traitors like you," Ms. Johnson spat. "We'll see you in court. The United States of America will rise again—on Earth or in the heavens."

Andrew said, "Why don't you just go to hell?"

The wallscreen, powered down from an expensive legal AI to a humble receptionist, chimed softly and announced, "A Mr. Harfield is here to see you. He does not have an appointment."

"What's he want?"

"He refuses to say."

"Then he can't come in."

"He doesn't want to come in. Apparently he doesn't trust computer spies like me. He's waiting downstairs—he said he'll be the one carrying a dino-skin briefcase with silver clasps."

Andrew laughed. The visitor sounded wacko, but he might be good for en-

tainment value if nothing else. "Okay, I'll go out to meet him. If I'm not back by tonight, call the police. Or at the very least, feed my cryo-worms."

He descended to the museum's foyer, and peered across the mosaic of ceramic tiles stripped from old space shuttles. A slim grey-suited figure stepped out from behind a satellite, carrying a briefcase in front of him like a shield. "Doctor Pitt?" he asked.

Andrew basked in the warm glow of his title. "Good afternoon," he said, extending his hand.

The wispy-bearded man eyed Andrew's hand as if examining it for germs or spying devices, then gingerly shook it. "I'm Christopher J. Harfield. Is there somewhere safe we can talk?"

Smiling, Andrew said, "The café is safe enough, as long as you avoid the doughnuts." Leftovers from the café, unwanted by paying visitors, were often distributed to lowly curators. The doughnuts' stale solidity made them ideal for building replica launch-towers.

Inside the café, excited children demanded rocket-shaped cookies and bickered over genuine astronaut rations, made from original recipes and served in replica squeeze-tubes. Andrew winced at the noise. While he was passionate about putting space history on display, the actual visitors tended to unnerve him.

Over coffee, Harfield stared in all directions as though suspecting the screaming kids of nefarious intent. "You're the man who recovered Voyager 2?"

Andrew nodded, trying not to look too smug as he nibbled a chocolate muffin.

"Did you play the Golden Record?" Harfield asked eagerly.

"I didn't have a chance," Andrew said. "The probe was in vacuum the whole way home, and as soon as I landed, it went into escrow. We won't be able to touch it until we win the court case. If we win, that is."

"You have to win. Don't you know why those USA people are trying so hard to get Voyager 2?"

"Because they think it's their property."

"But half the stuff in this museum is former US property," said Harfield.

"Voyager is just the test case. If we lose, they might get all the so-called American exhibits." Andrew seethed at the prospect. It was as absurd as demanding the return of the ancient pennies and quarters he'd found with his metal-detector. But if the museum lost half its hoard, it would only need half the staff—and Andrew would lose his job.

"Then why didn't they sue years ago?" Harfield asked, with an air of already having his own answer to this and many other questions.

"Maybe they've got a new pretend president or something." Andrew slammed his empty mug back on the table. "I don't read the newsletters of every re-enactment group in the world."

"No, it's not that," said Harfield. "This only mattered when Voyager turned up, because of the Golden Record."

"What—they have a desperate desire to hear Chuck Berry?"

Harfield shook his head with an exasperated jiggle. "They want to hear the hidden track."

"Oh, that old chestnut." When researching his thesis, Andrew had seen

ludicrous claims that the Golden Record hid some great secret. Space history was a frustrating subject for serious research, when even now the Conspiracy Channel still claimed that the first moon landing wasn't till 2047.

Harfield loomed across the table and spoke in low tones that Andrew could barely hear above the shouting kids launching their toy rockets from Milkshake Base to Cookie Moon.

"Carl Sagan was a physicist, who discovered a revolutionary new way to generate awesome energies from . . . well, he didn't say what from, not until he made the Golden Record. This was at the height of the Cold War, and he knew his breakthrough would only be used to make new weapons. So he kept it secret, and summarized the details on the Golden Record, because he thought that Voyager 2 would only ever be retrieved when Earth got past its wars, and humanity had learned to survive peacefully.

"And he was right, pretty much. The Cold War is history, and the World Polity has brought peace—or at least, just low-grade squabbling."

Andrew leaned back and smiled. "So the Golden Record contains a revolutionary theory. And presumably this is something that scientists haven't managed to discover in the centuries since?"

"You may not believe it," said Harfield, "but I can assure you that lots of people do. These American agitators—they call themselves patriots, but they're just terrorists. They want Voyager 2 because they want the Golden Record, and they think Sagan's theory will help them build weapons, bombs . . . whatever they need to overthrow the World Polity and re-establish the United States."

"You know, just for once I'd like to hear a conspiracy theory that isn't as far from sanity as Voyager was from the sun," said Andrew. "But suppose for the sake of argument I accept all this, there's still one question. What's your angle? What do you want?"

With a wounded expression, Harfield said, "I want to see the World Polity protected from dangerous fanatics armed with super-weapons."

"I think most of us want that," said Andrew. "But what's in it for you personally?"

"I've been researching the hidden history of the pre-millennium all my life, and I'm determined to track down Sagan's secret."

Andrew wondered whether such determination extended to traveling beyond the Kuiper belt. Who really owned that scavenger ship?

Harfield's voice, which had been rising, lowered to a croak. "If the USA gets Voyager 2, we'll never hear the Golden Record. You've got to win that court case. If you don't—where will they plant their first bomb?" He turned his head to gaze through the café windows at the main wing of the museum, where American booster stages made way for the landers of the World Polity. "It could be right here."

"Dr. Pitt," said Ms. Johnson from the prosecutor's dock, "when you stole—sorry, 'salvaged'—Voyager 2, did you or did you not see the badge of ownership on the craft?"

"I saw the Stars and Stripes flag, if that's what you mean." Andrew tried to stay calm as he gazed at the crowded courtroom: the jury, the cameras, the public galleries where Harfield looked on. Beside the judge

stood a statue of blind Justice, with one hand carrying scales and the other a globe, emblem of the World Polity.

"It is what I mean," said the Attorney General. "And you've already said that you'd visited Hawaii and you were familiar with the United States—which we must here call the United States of America in Exile—and its mission to educate the public and display its historic artifacts. Did it not occur to you that you had no right to collect Voyager, because there were others who had a far better claim?"

He knew what Belinda Johnson was trying to do. As the United States had no legal property rights in the World Polity's jurisdiction, she was trying to establish a moral right. Her rhetoric might sway the jury regardless of the technical merits of the case, particularly if any Houston residents harbored nostalgic affection for their ancestors' government.

"I thought I had every right to recover Voyager," he said firmly. "I've already mentioned our salvage license. But there's one final piece of evidence I want to put forward."

Andrew turned and pointed to the central exhibit: a huge transparent chamber containing Voyager 2, still in vacuum.

"Inside the craft is the Golden Record, a message from those who launched the probe to whoever would find it in the future. I'd like to play that disk now, as evidence."

Considerable legal wrangling ensued before Andrew was allowed to cite the very object at the center of the dispute. But eventually a robot crawler entered the chamber and retrieved the Golden Record, which was encased in a protective aluminum jacket, together with a cartridge and needle, exactly how it had been launched in 1977. As the airlock cycled and the relic entered atmosphere for the first time in centuries, tiny quantities of primordial dust blew off the surface. A fleeting aroma of antiquity settled over the hushed courtroom.

"The disk includes over a hundred pictures," said Andrew, "but I suggest we begin with the sounds on the record."

Court technicians, who'd been forewarned of the request, carefully placed the disk onto a turntable rotating 16 2/3 times per second. They fitted the ancient cartridge, and gently lowered it onto the Golden Record. Andrew wished that this playback could have occurred at the museum—he'd longed to play the disk himself—but at least the trial's publicity had boosted visitor numbers.

A loud crackle reverberated across the court. Then, through the background static, unintelligible words emerged, a succession of short sentences in Sumerian, Arabic, Urdu, Italian. . . . After two dozen different languages, an English phrase rang out: "Hello from the children of planet Earth." Then yet more languages, another thirty.

Andrew could see Ms. Johnson's expression slowly souring. Perhaps she guessed what point he was trying to make. But he didn't speak yet, letting the record play on. Next came miscellaneous sounds—thunder, dogs, trains. Music followed: five minutes of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto. Rapt, the courtroom audience listened to the message in a bottle cast into a cosmic ocean.

In the brief pause that followed Bach, Andrew said, "Next up is a Javan

gamelan, then Senegalese percussion." In turn he briefly introduced songs from Zairian pygmies and Australian aborigines. When Chuck Berry performed "Johnny B. Goode," the jury tapped their fingers to the classical melody. In total, an hour and a half of diverse music played out, a medley of global culture from the past millennium.

As the cartridge reached the end of the record, Andrew looked up to the public gallery, and saw Harfield's face contorted with disappointment and rage.

If there had been a revolutionary theory on the disk, playing it in open court would have stopped the USA being the only ones to learn it, even if they won custody of Voyager. But now he'd averted that remote danger, Andrew had to concentrate on the real task: preventing Ms. Johnson from winning.

"I played the Golden Record," he said, "to show us the minds of the Americans who launched Voyager. They were proud of their United States—that's why they painted their flag on the probe. But the Golden Record didn't only contain pictures of America, or the language and culture of America. You heard fifty-five different languages from around the world, and music from countries across the globe, from Peru to Bulgaria to Azerbaijan. Voyager 2's Golden Record was a message not from the United States, but from the whole world. They anticipated the World Polity before it arrived. And that's why I believe that our museum, funded by the World Polity, is the best place for the Voyager probe—rather than the United States in Exile, which appears to exist solely for hatred of the World Polity and the global harmony it stands for."

Andrew hoped this speech would refute Ms. Johnson's "moral rights" argument. To emphasize the point, he projected the Golden Record's pictures, from the Sydney Opera House to the Great Wall of China, via children holding a globe at the old United Nations. No strange equations appeared, although conspiracists would undoubtedly seek to decode the images' hidden meanings.

He wished that the trial would hurry up and finish, that the jury could be sent out right after hearing the Golden Record. But one thing hadn't changed over the centuries—court cases still took forever. More witnesses were called, more evidence was heard, and plenty more jargon was wrangled before Ms. Johnson finally made her closing argument.

"We've heard the Golden Record," she said, with a hint of waspishness. "But the disk wasn't designed for us to hear. It was made for the children of other stars, not the children of its makers. The United States explored the solar system, expecting that we'd go on to explore the galaxy. What has the World Polity done since then? Nothing! You've heard that crackly old disk, but the *real* golden record is America's long history of discovery. And so we say that Voyager 2 belongs to the United States, because it represents America's legacy, which the World Polity has so shamefully abandoned."

At last the jury retired to consider their verdict.

Andrew had booked into a hotel near the courthouse for the duration of the trial. After two hours of phone calls with family and other well wishers—and the friend looking after his cryo-worms—he was full of nervous

energy he couldn't dispel. Just when he decided to work it off in fight-sim, someone knocked on the door. Glad of the distraction, Andrew opened it and saw Harfield scowling like a wrathful gargoyle. The conspiracist pushed his way in and slammed the door behind him.

"All right, Pitt, where's the Golden Record?"

Baffled by the question, Andrew said, "You saw it today in court. You heard it played! What's the matter—do you want to play it backward?"

"I already reversed the court recordings," Harfield said, taking Andrew's joke at face value. "I also analyzed holograms of the disk, to see if it had any secret grooves beside the main track. Nothing! Sagan's theory wasn't anywhere on the record. That one must have been a fake. You had Voyager 2 in your ship all the way home—plenty of time to install a dummy and steal the real disk. So where is it?"

Andrew shook his head. "That was the real Golden Record. If it didn't contain what you expected, that's your problem."

Harfield smiled a humorless smile. "No, Dr. Pitt, it's your problem." He produced a small black weapon of a kind Andrew had only ever seen on TV. "I'm tired of the show trial. Give me the real Golden Record—*now*."

Andrew's heartbeat stuttered as he gazed at the gun. "But . . . you think it's in this hotel room?" How could he communicate with someone who had so clearly lost all grip on reality?

"I don't know where it is. All I know is that you'll lead me to it. Start walking," said Harfield.

Andrew swallowed hard. What should he do—walk outside, then try to lead Harfield to the police? That probably wouldn't work. Indeed, whatever he tried was bound to fail. Conspiracy theorists never gave up, no matter what the evidence. When Andrew was two hundred years old, Harfield's ilk would still be hounding him, barging through the nursing home's doors and rooting through his life-support machine.

He looked Harfield in the mad staring eyes and said, "If I gave you another disk, you wouldn't believe it was real, would you? Even if I gave you a disk with some weird equations, you wouldn't believe it was Sagan's theory—you'd think I was hiding the true theory and trying to fob you off with a fake."

"Give me the disk, and we'll see."

"I can't!" shouted Andrew in frustration.

Harfield's expression darkened, his eyebrows beetling closer together. He lifted the gun and sighted down it as though selecting which of Andrew's extremities to zap first.

"You'll only believe you have the real Golden Record if you get it yourself," said Andrew.

"I tried, and you beat me to it," Harfield said bitterly.

So it was Harfield in the other ship. "You still can get it," Andrew said. "There are two Voyagers, you know."

"Of course I know that. But our information says that Sagan only hid his theory in the second Voyager."

Andrew laughed, finally seeing a way out of this. "And you fell for that misdirection?" he said, not bothering to hide his contempt for conspiracy theorists who'd believe anything rather than the boring old truth. "Voy-

ager 2 was launched first. Obviously the second Voyager, by launch date, is Voyager 1."

Harfield hesitated. "Really? It would be typical misdirection—"

"Yes," said Andrew. "But you'd better get out there quickly. Now that the Voyager 2 disk has been played, all your rivals will realize the secrets are in Voyager 1. You don't want to be beaten to it again."

"No!" exclaimed Harfield. "You're right. I need to find the real Golden Record myself. But remember: not a word about this to anyone." He waved the gun in Andrew's face. "Or I'll be back!"

The conspiracist ran out of the hotel, chasing his mirage.

In the morning the jury reached their verdict. They dismissed the claim of the United States of America in Exile, and upheld the Houston Space-flight Museum's ownership of Voyager 2. Andrew felt a vast weight had been lifted from him, like the end of a rocket launch when acceleration gave way to free-fall.

He wanted to speak to Belinda Johnson, but the crush of journalists and onlookers prevented it. In the end he had to phone her that evening.

"If you're just calling to gloat, save your breath," she said.

"It's not that. I wanted to speak to you about a guy called Christopher Harfield. He has a silly conspiracy theory about some scientific breakthrough being hidden on the Golden Record."

Onscreen, he saw Ms. Johnson sigh. "I've heard of him," she said. "What about it?"

"You've heard of him? That's interesting, because he said you only wanted Voyager so you could get Sagan's breakthrough and use it to make weapons."

"That was *not* the reason," she said sharply. "Yes, some of our people had heard rumors about the hidden track. I never believed in it myself, but if it turned out to exist—if there really was a source of vast energy—then I thought we could use it to build starships. Unlike the World Polity, I still believe our destiny is in the stars."

"Fair enough," said Andrew. After encountering Harfield, he had far more respect for the Attorney General and her motives. "If you still believe the Voyager probes are your rightful property, you might want to hurry up and collect Voyager 1. Harfield is going out after it. There's no way the museum would fund me to go and retrieve it—we've got one Voyager, so we don't need both. But I thought you might want to know, in case you wanted to save Voyager 1."

Ms. Johnson laughed. "Thanks for the tip. But it's already taken care of. A few months ago, while you two were squabbling over Voyager 2, I was out in space picking up Voyager 1. I didn't bring it back, because I don't think a museum—whether mine or yours—is the right place for a space probe. Instead I moved it a few billion miles, to foil collectors, and then I launched it toward Tau Ceti. If the World Polity won't do it, someone must. Sooner or later, a United States probe will reach the stars. And we will follow."

Andrew couldn't help admiring Belinda's idealism, reminiscent of Carl Sagan and countless other space pioneers. "When that happens," he said, "we'll show the whole story here at the museum." ○

Michael Swanwick assures us that he would update his biographical information for the following story if it were it not for the fact that my frequent requests for this data have reduced him in size to two and a quarter inches. He says he is being held captive in a terrarium on the desk of Gregor Samsa in a demented research institution. (Of course, this obviously isn't true, since if it were, we'd have to look for Robert Reed with a microscope.) Much as we may sympathize with Michael's plight, this predicament has nothing to do with his latest story. Consequently, Will, a continuing character from "The Word that Sings the Scythe" (*Asimov's*, October/November 2004), must explore, without preamble, the treacherous subterranean reaches of . . .

LORD WEARY'S EMPIRE

Michael Swanwick

Like a leaf before a storm, Will fled. The basement corridors of Babel careened and reeled nightmarishly by and still he could not lose his pursuers. Three times the lancers had a clear line of sight and fired, each shot a blow to Will's ringing ears. But then, just beyond a row of overflowing garbage cans, Will saw a steel access door, chained shut but slightly ajar in its frame. He stooped and, grabbing the lower edge of the door, yanked with all his might.

A bullet burned through the air over his head.

The door lurched open, wrenched out of true.

Frantically, Will squeezed through the triangular space and tumbled down a short flight of metal steps. As he stumbled to his feet, he heard the lancers, too large to squeeze through themselves, trying to break down the door.

Blindly, he ran.

Rats scurried away at his approach. Roaches crunched underfoot. He was in a great dark space punctuated by massive I-beams and lit only by infrequent bare bulbs whose light struggled to reach the floor. Somehow, he had made his way into the network of train tunnels that spiraled up through Babel Tower.

Careful to avoid the third rail, Will followed one curving set of tracks into darkness, listening for approaching trains. Sometimes he heard their thunder in the distance, and once a train slammed past, mere inches from where he pressed himself, shivering, against the wall, and left him temporarily blinded. When he could see again, the tunnels were silent. He had lost his pursuers. He was safe now.

And hopelessly lost.

He'd been plodding along for some time when he saw a sewer worker—a haint—in the tunnel ahead, in hip waders and hard hat. "What you doing here, white boy?" the haint asked when Will hailed him.

"I'm lost."

"Well, you best get yourself unlost. They's trouble brewing."

"I can't," Will began. "I don't know—"

"It's your ass," the haint said. He faded through a wall and was gone.

Will spat in frustration. Then he walked on.

He knew that he'd wandered into dangerous territory when his left hand suddenly rose up of its own volition to clutch his right forearm. *Stop!* he thought to himself. Adrenaline raced through his veins.

Will peered into the claustrophobic blackness and saw nothing. A distant electric bulb cast only the slightest glimmer on the rails. The support beams here were as thick as trees in a midnight forest. He could not make out how far they extended. But by the spacious feel of the air, he was in a place where several lines of tracks joined and for a time ran together.

Far behind him was a lone set of signal lights, unvarying green and red dots.

He was abruptly aware of how easy it would be for somebody to sneak up behind him here. Maybe, he thought, he should turn around and go back.

In that instant, an unseen fist punched him hard in the stomach.

Will bent over almost double, and simultaneously his arms were seized from either side. His captors shoved him forward and forced him down onto his knees. His head was bent almost to the ground.

"Release him." The voice was warm and calm, that of a leader.

The hands let go. Will remained kneeling. Gasping, he straightened and looked about.

He was surrounded.

They—whoever they were—had come up around him in silence. Will's sense of hearing was acute, but even now he couldn't place them by sound. Rather, he felt the pressure of their collective gaze, and saw their eyes, pair by pair, wink into existence.

"Boy, you're in serious trouble now," the voice said, almost mournfully.

For an instant, Will could not speak. But then the speaker's eyes glowed red. "Well? Bast got your tongue? I'm giving you the opportunity to explain why you have invaded the Army of Night's turf. You won't get a second."

Will fought down his fear. There was great danger here, but great opportunity as well—if he had the nerve to grasp it. Speaking with a boldness he did not feel, he said, “This is your territory. I recognize that. It wasn’t my intention to trespass. But now that I’m here, I hope you’ll allow me to stay.”

Calmly, dangerously, the speaker said, “Oh?”

“I’m broke, paperless, and without friends. I’m being pursued and I need someplace to be. This looks as good as any. Let me join your army and I’ll serve you well.”

“Who’s chasing you?”

Will thought of the lancers, of the customs agents before them, and of the political police even earlier, and made a wry grimace. “Who isn’t?”

“He kinda cute, Lord Weary,” said somebody female. “If he can’t fight, maybe we find some other use for him.” Several of her comrades snickered.

A third voice said, “Shut the fuck up, Jenny! The Breaknecks sent him here to spy on us. He dies. Simple as that.”

“That’s not your decision, Tatterwag,” Lord Weary said sharply.

“*Siktir git!*” Tatterwag swore. “We know what he is!”

“Are we savages? No, we are a community of brothers. Whatever is done here will be done in accordance with our laws.” There was a long pause, during which Will imagined Lord Weary looking from side to side to see if any dared oppose him. When no one did, he went on, “You brought this upon yourself.”

Will didn’t ask what Lord Weary meant by that. He recognized a gang when he encountered one—he’d run with enough of them as a boy. There was always a leader, always the bright kid who stood at his shoulder advising him, always the troublemaker who wanted to usurp the leader’s place. They always had laws, which were never written down. Their idea of justice was inevitably the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye and a drubbing for an insult. They always settled their differences with a fight.

“Trial by combat,” Lord Weary said.

Somebody lit a match. With a soft hiss, a Coleman lantern shed fierce white light over the thronged I-beams, making them leap and then fall as the flame was adjusted down again to near-extinction.

“You may stand now.”

Will stood.

A ragged line of some twenty to thirty feys confronted him. They were of varied types and races, tall and short, male and female, but all looked beaten and angry, like feral dogs that know they can never triumph over the village-dwellers but will savage one who is caught alone and without weapons. The lantern shone through several, but dimly, as if through smoked glass, and by this Will knew that they were haints.

Directly before Will stood a tall figure whose air of command made clear that he could only be Lord Weary. He had the pallor, high cheekbones, and almost lanceolate ears of one of high-elven blood, and the noble bearing of a born leader as well. Will could not pick out the owners of the other two voices.

But then a swamp gaunt rushed out of the pack and, pointing a skinny arm at Will, cried, “He’s one of the Breakneck Boys! I say we kill him now. Just kill him!”

So he had to be Tatterwag.

Will strode forward, throwing a hard shoulder into the gaunt to knock him aside. "Kill me if you think it possible," he said to Lord Weary. "But I don't think you can. If you doubt me, then name your champion. Make him the biggest, strongest mother you've got, so there won't be any doubt afterward that I could defeat any one of you if I had to. I do not brag. Then, if you'll take me, I will gladly pledge my loyalty and put my powers at your service."

"That was well spoken," Lord Weary said mildly. "But talk is cheap and times are hard." Raising his voice, he said, "Who shall be our champion?"

"Bonecrusher," somebody said.

There was susurruration of agreement. "Bonecrusher . . . 'Crusher . . . The big fella . . . Yeah, Bonecrusher."

The figure that shambled forward was covered with fur, wore no clothing, and carried a length of metal pipe for a club. It was a wodewose—a wild man of the forest.

Will had seen wild men before, out in the Old Forest. In some ways, they were little more than animals, though articulate enough for simple conversations and too cunning to be safely hunted. They were stuck forever in the dawn-times, unable to cope with any way of life more sophisticated than a hunter-gatherer existence nor any tool more complex than a pointed stick. Machines they feared, and they would not sleep in houses, though occasionally an injured one might take shelter in a barn. He could not imagine what twisty path had brought this one so far from his natural habitat.

The wodewose's mouth worked with the effort of summoning up words. "Fuck you," he said at last. Then, after a pause, "Asshole."

Will bowed. "I accept your challenge, sir. I'll try my best to do you no permanent harm."

A mean grin appeared in the wild man's unkempt beard. "You're bug-fuck," he said, and then, "Shithead."

This was another thing that every gang Will had ever been in had: Somebody big and stupid who lived to fight.

Lord Weary faded back into darkness and returned bearing a length of pipe, much like the one the wodewose carried. He handed it to Will. "There are no rules," he said. "Except that one of you must die." He raised his voice. "Are the combatants ready?"

"Fuck yeah."

"Yes," Will said.

"Then douse the light."

All in an instant, darkness swallowed Will whole. In sudden fear he cried, "I can't see!"

There was a smile in Lord Weary's voice. "We can."

With a soft scuffle of bare feet, Bonecrusher attacked.

Though Will felt himself as good as blind, there must have been some residual fraction of light, for he saw a pale glint of pipe as it slashed downward at his head. Panicked, he brought up his own pipe just in time to block it.

The force of the blow buckled his knees.

The wodewose raised the pipe again, then chopped it down, trying for Will's shin. Will was barely able to leap back from it in time. There was a *clang* as the pipe bounced off the rail, striking sparks. He found himself panting, though he hadn't even struck a blow yet.

Will knew how to fight with a quarterstaff—every village lad did—but the wild man was not fighting quarterstaff-style but club-style. It was a sweeping, muscular fighting technique the like of which he had never faced before. Back the club slashed, inches from his chest. Had it connected it would have broken Will's ribs. The wild man followed through, as if he were swinging a baseball bat, and brought it smoothly back, hard and level. Will ducked low, saving his skull from being crushed.

Will swung his pipe wildly, and felt it bounce off the wodewose's ribs. But it didn't even slow the wild man down. His club came down on Will's shoulder.

Just barely, Will managed to twist aside, so that the club only dealt him a glancing, stinging blow to his arm. But that was enough to numb him for an instant and make his fingers involuntarily release their hold on one end of his weapon. Now it was held only by his left hand.

There was a murmur of admiration from the watchers, but no more. Which meant that Bonecrusher was not popular in the Army of Night, however much they might value his fighting skill.

The pain brought the dragon rising up within Will, a ravening wave of anger that threatened to wash over his mind and drown all conscious thought. He fought it down. Whirling the pipe around his head, he fainted at one shoulder. Then, when the wodewose brought up his own weapon to block it, he shifted his attack. The pipe slammed into Bonecrusher's forehead and bounced off.

Bonecrusher shook his matted dreadlocks and raised his weapon once more.

At that moment, a great noise rose up in the distance. A train! Will tucked his pipe under one arm as if it were a lance and ran full-tilt at his opponent. The pipe struck him in the chest and knocked him stumbling backward.

The train rounded a bend. Its headlight blossomed like the sun at midnight.

Will retreated to the far side of the track. He pressed himself against the nearest support beam, feeling its cold strength under his back. Across from him, Bonecrusher started forward, hesitated, and then turned away, one great hand covering his eyes.

His eyes? Oh.

The locomotive slammed past Will, a wash of air shoving against him like a warm fist. He had a momentary glimpse of astonished faces in the passenger car windows before he threw an arm over his eyes to shield himself from the painfully bright light.

Then the train was gone. When he opened his eyes again, he could see nothing.

Bonecrusher chuckled. "Yer blind, aintcha?" he said. "Motherfucker."

Now Will was truly afraid.

With fear came anger, however, and anger made it easier for him to

draw upon the dragon-darkness within him. He felt it rising up in his blood and clamped down tight. He refused to give it control. It struggled against him, a fire running through his veins, an evil song lifting in his throat. It yearned to be let free.

He heard the whisper of Bonecrusher's naked feet on the railroad ties. He backed away.

Now an inner vision seemed to pierce the darkness. All was still shadow within shadow, but he knew that the shifting blackness directly before him was the wodewose padding quietly forward, raising his makeshift club for one final and devastating blow.

The dragon-anger was straining at its leash. So Will let slip his hold a little, allowing the anger to leap forward to meet the attack. He threw aside his own pipe and stepped into the blow. With one hand, he caught the wild man's club and wrested it from his grasp. With the other, he seized the wodewose by the throat.

Flinging away the wodewose's weapon, he stooped and grabbed his opponent by his thigh. The creature's fur was as stiff as an Airedale's, and matted with knots. Will lifted him up over his head. He tried to curse, but Will's hand clutched his throat too tightly for anything meaningful to emerge.

The bastard was helpless now. Will could swing him around and smash his head against a pillar or drop him down over his knee, breaking his spine. It would be the easiest thing in the world, either way.

Well, screw that.

"I don't have anything against you," he told his struggling opponent. "Give me your word of surrender, and I'll set you free."

Bonecrusher made a gurgling noise.

"That's not possible," Lord Weary said with obvious regret. "Our laws say: To the death."

Frustration filled Will. To have come so far, only to be thwarted by a childish warrior's code! Well, then, he would have to run. He doubted the Army of the Night would pursue him with much enthusiasm after seeing how easily he defeated their champion.

"If your laws say that," Will snarled, "then they're not mine."

With a surge of anger, he flung the wodewose away from him.

"Fucking bas-!" The word cut off abruptly as the wodewose hit the ground. Electrical sparks flew into the air like fireworks. The wodewose's body arched and crisped. There was a smell of burnt hair and scorched flesh.

Somebody whistled and said, "That's cold."

Will had forgotten entirely about the third rail.

Lord Weary picked out four of his soldiers for a burial detail. "Carry Bonecrusher upstairs," he said, "and leave him somewhere he'll be found, so that City Services will take care of the body. Be sure he's lying facing up! I don't want one of my soldiers mistaken for an animal." Then he clapped a hand on Will's shoulder. "Well fought, boy. Welcome to the Army of Night."

When the burial detail had lugged Bonecrusher's body into oblivion, Lord Weary lined up those who remained and led them the other way. "On to Niflheim," he said. Will joined the line and, shivering, managed to keep pace.

He'd walked for what seemed like forever and no time at all when the smell of urine and feces welled up around him so strong that it made his eyes water. Somebody lived down here. A lot of somebodies. Will found himself stumbling up a crumbling set of stairs and onto a cement platform.

A miniature city arose before him. There were perhaps a hundred or so shanties built one on top of the other from wooden crates and cardboard boxes, each one sufficient to hold a sleeping bag and little more. Wicker baskets, large enough to sleep in, hung from the ceiling. There were narrow streets between the shanties down which shadows flitted. The Army wove its way through them into a central plaza, where a cluster of haints and feys sat crouched around a portable television set, its volume turned down to a murmur. Others sat about talking quietly or reading tattered paperbacks by candlelight. High on the walls above was a frieze of tiles that showed dwarves mining and smelting and manufacturing. Deep runes in the stone arch over a cinder-blocked doorway read: NIFLHEIM STATION. By the newspapers and old clothes strewn about, it had been closed and abandoned long ago.

A hulder (Will could tell from her buxom figure and by the cow's tail sticking out from under her skirt) rose to greet them. "Lord Weary," she said. "You are welcome here, and your army too. I see you have somebody new." Most of those who rose in her wake were haints.

"I thank you,thane-lady Hjördis. Our recruit is so recent he hasn't chosen a name for himself yet. He is our new champion."

"Him?" Hjördis scowled. "This *boy*?"

"Don't be fooled by his looks, the lad's tough. He killed Bonecrusher."

Soft muttering washed over the platform. "By trickery?" somebody asked dubiously.

"In fair and open combat. I saw it all."

There was a moment's tension before thethane-lady nodded, accepting. Then Lord Weary said to her, "We must confer. Serious matters are afoot."

"First we eat," Hjördis said. "You will sit with me at the head table."

To Will's surprise, he was included with Lord Weary in the invitation. Apparently the office of champion made him a counselor as well. He watched as tables were built in the central square, of boards set over wire milk crates, and then covered with sheets of newspaper in place of linen. A cobbler set out pads of newspaper for seats and paper plates for them to eat from. Another filled the plates with food. Thethane-lady's table was set under the wall, beneath the tiled dwarves. She and her favored companions sat with their backs to the wall, so that the rows of lesser-ranked diners faced them.

The food was better than might be expected, some of it scrounged from grocery store dumpsters after passing its sell-by date and the rest of it from upstairs charities. They ate by the light of tuna-can lamps with rag wicks in rancid cooking oil, conversing quietly.

Will commented that the tunnels seemed more labyrinthine and of greater extent than he had thought they would be, and Hjördis said, "You don't know the half of it. There used to be fifteen different gas companies in Babel, six separate sets of steam tunnels, and SIRRUSH only can say how many subway systems, pneumatic trains, sub-surface lines, under-

ground trolleys, and pedestrian walkways that nobody uses any more. Add to that maintenance tunnels for the power and telephone and plumbing and sewage systems, storm drains, the summer retreats that the wealthy used to have dug for them a century ago, bomb shelters, bootleggers' vaults . . ."

Lord Weary shook his head in agreement. "There is no lore-master of Babel's secret ways. They are too many, and too varied." His sea-green eyes studied Will gravely. "Now. Tell us what drove you here."

Here was another moment of danger. Will knew he must speak carefully and truthfully, or he would not survive the meal. Lord Weary's stern face convinced him of it.

He told his tale:

Long, long ago—though it could scarcely have been more than a year—a war-dragon had crashed in the Old Forest outside Will's village. His fuselage was torn and gashed and its half-elven pilot was dead. Yet he retained enough fuel to crawl into the center square of the village and declare himself its king. None of the elders dare oppose him, for he still had his armament and malice enough to touch it off if he were crossed. Yet he could barely move, and so he had chosen a lieutenant to represent him—male rather than female and young rather than old, for the village hags were far too wily for him to trust.

He had chosen Will.

Then had Will learned the terrible isolation of the collaborator. Though it was none of his choosing, he was despised by all and alienated from those who had been his friends. In the day, he walked about the village, observing. At night, he sat in the pilot's seat and long needles in the arm-rests slid into his wrists so that the dragon could slither into his mind and access his memories directly, seeing what he had seen and feeling what he had felt. Everybody knew of this, and so they shunned him.

He had thought that things could not get worse. He had been wrong. A rebellion arose among the younger citizens and to put it down the dragon had entered into Will's mind one evening and not left. Leaving footprints of flame behind him, he had walked through the village, terrorizing all and seizing the rebellion's ringleader.

Puck Berrysnatcher had been Will's best friend. Will had crucified him.

With a cunning and boldness he had not known he possessed, Will had finally managed to kill the dragon and by so doing free the villagers from his tyranny. But that had not changed anybody's mind about him.

"Since that time," Will said, "I have been cast out of my village and ill-fortune has pursued me across Fäerie Minor all the way to the Dread Tower. Perhaps I have been cursed by the dragon's death." He did not say that some fraction of the dragon remained within him yet. On that matter, silence was safest. "All I know is that from that day I have had no place to call home."

"You have a home here now, lad," said Lord Weary. "We shall be a second family to you, if you will have us."

He laid a hand on Will's head, and a great flood of emotion washed over Will. Suddenly, and for no reason he could name, he loved the elf-lord like a father. Warm tears flowed down his cheeks.

When he could speak again, Will asked, "Why do you live down here?"

It was a meaningless question, meant simply to move the conversation to less emotional ground. But graciously, Hjördis explained that though those above dismissed the dwellers in darkness as trolls and feral dwarves, very few of them were subterranean by nature. Most of the thane-lady's folk were haints and drows, nissen, shellycoats, and broken feys—anyone lacking the money or social graces to get along in open society. They had problems with drugs and alcohol and insanity, but they looked after one another as best they could. Their own name for themselves was *johatsu*—"nameless wanderers."

"Are there a lot of communities like this one?"

"There are dozens," Lord Weary said, "and possibly even hundreds. Some are as small as six or ten individuals. Others run much larger than what you see here. No one knows for sure how many live in darkness. Tatterwag speculates there are tens of thousands. But they don't communicate with each other and they won't work together and they are perforce nomadic, for periodically the transit police discover the settlements and bust them up, scattering their citizens. But the Army of Night is going to change all that. We're the first and only organized military force the johatsu have ever formed."

"How many are in the Army, all told?"

The thane-lady hid a smile under a paper napkin. Stiffly, Lord Weary said, "You've met them all. This is a new idea, and slow to catch on. But it will grow. My dream will bear fruit in the fullness of time." His voice rose. "Look around you! These are the dispossessed of Babel—the weak, the injured, the gentle. Who speaks for them? Not the Lords of the Mayoralty. Not the Council of Magi. His Absent Majesty was their protector once, but he is long gone and no one knows where. Somebody must step forward to fill that void. I swear by the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars, and the Golden Apples of the West, that if the Seven permit it, that somebody shall be me!"

The johatsu froze in their places, not speaking, barely breathing. Their eyes shone like stars.

Hjördis laid a hand over Lord Weary's. "Great matters will wait upon food," she said. "Time enough to discuss these things after we eat."

When all had eaten and the dishes been cleared away, Hjördis lit a cigarette and passed it around the table. "Well?" she said at last.

"When last we were here," Lord Weary said, "I left some crates in your keeping. Now we have need of them."

A shadow crossed the thane-lady's face. But she nodded. "I thought as much. So I had my folk retrieve them."

Six Niflheimers stood up, faded into darkness, and returned, lugging long wooden crates between them. The crates were laid down before the table and, at a gesture from Lord Weary, Taggerwag pried open one with his Bowie knife.

Light gleamed on rifle barrels.

Suddenly the taste of death was in the air. Cautiously, Will said, "What do we need these for?"

"There's going to be a rat hunt," Lord Weary said.

"We're hunting rats?"

Lord Weary grinned mirthlessly. "We're not the hunters, lad. We're the rats."

The Niflheimers had been listening intently. Now they crowded around the main table. "We call them the Breakneck Boys," one said. "They come down here once a month, on the day of the Toad or maybe the day of the Labrys, looking for some fun. They got night-goggles and protective spells like you wouldn't believe, and they carry aluminum baseball bats. Mostly, we just slip away from 'em. But they usually manage to find somebody too old or sick or drugged-up to avoid them."

"It's a fucking *hobby* for them," Tatterwag growled.

"Last time, they caught poor old Martin Pecker drunk asleep, only instead of giving him a bashing like usual, they poured gasoline over him and set it on fire."

"I saw the corpse!"

"Long have I argued against this course of action as a mad notion and a dangerous folly," the thane-lady said. "Their sires are industrialists and Lords of the Mayoralty. If even one of their brats dies, they'll send the mosstroopers down here with dire wolves to exact revenge." Then, with obvious reluctance, "Yet the Breaknecks' predations worsen. I see no alternative."

"No!" Will said. He had eaten almost nothing, for his stomach was still queasy from the stench of Niflheim, and Bonecrusher's death weighed heavily upon him. If he closed his eyes, he could see the sparks rising up around the wodewose's body. He hadn't wanted to kill the creature. It had happened because he hadn't thought the situation through beforehand. Now he was thinking very hard and fast indeed. "Put the guns back."

"You're not *afraid*?" Lord Weary drew himself up straight, and Will felt his disapproval like a lash across his shoulders.

"I can take care of the Breaknecks," Will said. "If you want me to, I'll take care of them myself."

There was a sudden silence.

"Alone?"

"Yes. But to pull this off, I'll need a uniform. The gaudier the better. And war paint. The kind that glows in the dark."

Hjördis grinned. "I'll send our best shoplifters upstairs."

"And explosives. A hand grenade would be best, but—no? Well, is there any way we can get our hands on some chemicals to make a bomb?"

"There's a methamphetamine lab up near the surface," Tatterwag said. "The creeps who run it think nobody knows it's there. They got big tanks of ethyl ether and white gasoline. Maybe even some red phosphorus."

"Do we have anybody who knows how to handle them safely?"

"Um . . . there's one of us got a Ph.D. in alchemy. Only, it was back when. Up above." Tatterwag glanced nervously at Lord Weary. "Before he came here. So I don't know whether he wants me to say his name or not."

"You have a doctorate?" Will said. "How in the world did you . . ." He was going to say *fall so low* but thought better of it. ". . . wind up here?"

Offhandedly, Lord Weary said, "Carelessness. Somebody offered me a drink. I liked it, so I had another. Only one hand is needed to hold a glass,

so I took up smoking to give the other one something to do. I took to dueling and from there it was only a small step to gambling. I bought a fighting cock. I bought a bear. I bought a dwarf. I began to frequent tailors and whores. From champagne I moved to whisky, from whisky to wine, and from wine to Sterno. So it went until the only libation I had not yet drunk was blood, the only sex untried was squalid, and the only vice untasted was violent revolution.

"Every step downward was pleasant. Every new experience filled me with disdain for those who dared not share in it. And so, well, here I am."

"Is this a true history," Will asked, "or a parable?"

"Your question," Lord Weary said, "is a deeper one than you know—whether the world I sank through was real or illusory. Many a better mind than mine or yours has grappled with this very issue without result. In any event, I'll make your bomb."

It took hours to make the plan firm. But at last Hjördis rose from the table and said, "Enough. Our new champion is doubtless tired. Bonecrusher's quarters are yours now. I will show you where you sleep."

She took Will by the hand and led him to an obscure corner of the box-village. There she knelt before a kind of tent made of patched blankets hung from clotheslines. "In here." She raised the flap and crawled inside.

Will followed.

To his surprise, the interior was clean. Inside, a faded Tabriz carpet laid over stacked cardboard served as floor and mattress. A vase filled with phosphorescent fungi cast a gentle light over the space. Hjördis turned and, kneeling, said, "All that was 'Crusher's is yours now. His tent. His title . . ." She pulled her dress off over her head. "His duties."

Will took a deep, astonished breath. It seemed too awful to kill the wodewose and bed his lover all on the same day. Hesitatingly, he said, "We don't *have* to . . ."

The thane-lady stared at him in blank astonishment. "You're not gay, are you? Or suffering from the fisher king's disease?" She touched his crotch, "No, I can see you're not. What is it, then?"

"I just don't see how you can sleep with me after I killed your . . . killed Bonecrusher."

"You don't think this is *personal*, do you?" Hjördis laughed. "Blondie, you're the most fucked-up champion I ever saw." At her direction, he took off his clothes. She drew him down and guided him inside her. Then she wrapped her legs around his waist and slapped him on the rump.

"Giddy up," she commanded.

Halfway through the night they galloped. In the morning (but he had to take Hjördis's word for it that it was morning), Will went out with two of Lord Weary's scouts to look over possible locales for the plan. Then he returned to the box city and sorted through the heaps of clothing that the Niflheimers brought him, some dug out of old stashes and some fresh-stolen for the occasion. Carefully, he assembled his costume: Biker boots. Mariachi pants. A top hat with a white scarf wrapped around the band, one end hanging free behind like a ghostly fox tail, with a handful of turkey feathers from the meat packing district splayed along the side. A

marching band jacket with a white sash. All topped off with a necklace of rat skulls.

With the phosphorescent makeup, he painted two red slashes slanting downward over his eyes, a straight blue line along his nose, and a yellow triangle about his mouth to make a mocking, cartoonish grin:



With luck, the effect would be eerie enough to give his enemies pause. More importantly, the elves would see the glowing lines on his face, the top-hat-feathers-and-scarf, and the necklace of skulls, but they wouldn't see *him*. Once he wiped off the makeup and ditched the uniform, he would be anonymous again. He could walk the streets above without fearing arrest.

"I'll just need just one last thing," he said when he was done. "A motorcycle."

Two days later, the Army of Night's outposts came running up silently with news that the Breakneck Boys had entered the tunnels. Will had already scouted out the perfect place for a confrontation—a vast and vaulted space as large as a cathedral that had been constructed centuries ago as a cistern for times of siege. A far more recent water main cut through it at the upper end, but otherwise it was much as it had been the day it was drained. Now he sent out decoys to lure the Boys there, while he made up his face with phosphorescent war-paint and wheeled his stolen motorcycle into place.

Will waited alone in a niche behind a pillar at the lower end of the cistern. He'd stone-souped the johatsu by asking for first one small thing and then another, each incrementally larger than the one before, because there'd been no alternative. Had he asked for the motorcycle first, he wouldn't have gotten it. But this was as far as bluff would take him. Now he was either going to triumph or die.

For the longest time there was no noise other than the grumble of distant trains. Then, faintly, he heard drunken elven laughter. He watched as the decoys ran past his station, like two furtive shadows. The voices grew more boisterous and then suddenly boomed as the Breakneck Boys emerged from a doorway near the ceiling at the upper end of the cistern.

They began to descend a long brick stairway along the far wall.

They glimmered in the dark, did the elves, like starlight. They carried Maglites and aluminum bats. Some wore camouflage suits. Some had night goggles. They were nine in number, and uncannily young, little more than children. Their leader drained the last of his beer and threw away the can. It rattled into silence.

Will waited until they were off the stairs and had clambered over the water main and started across the cistern floor. Then he kick-started the motorcycle. It was a stripped-down Kawasaki three cylinder two-stroke, easy to handle and loud as hell. Pulling out of the niche, Will cranked the

machine hard left and opened it up. The vault ceiling bouncing the engine's roar back at him, he charged at the elf-pack like a banshee with her ass on fire.

It felt great to be on a cycle again! Puck Berrysnatcher, back when he and Will were best friends, had owned a dirt bike, and they'd practiced on it, turn on turn, until they both mastered such stunts as young males thought important.

Will popped a wheelie and came to a stop not ten yards from the astonished elves.

Throttling down the engine so he could be heard, he cried, "I challenge thee by the *holmgangulog*, if thou hast honor! I am the captain and the rightwise defender of my folk. Present your champion that we may contest at deeds of arms."

A disbelieving look, followed by low, mean laughter passed among the elves. "So you know the politesse of challenge, Master Scarecrow," said the foremost of them. Whatever else he might be, he was no coward. "Very well. I hight Florian of House L'Inconnu." He bowed mockingly. "What is your name and what terms do you propose?"

"Captain Jack Riddle," Will said, choosing the *nom de guerre* almost at random. "High explosives at close quarters."

The elf-brat rubbed his chin, as if amused. "Your proposal is scarce workable." Casually, his hand crept downward between the lapels of his jacket. Doubtless he had a gun there in a shoulder harness. "For, you see, I have no explosives with me."

"Tough titty," Will said.

With a muttered word, he detonated the bomb which earlier he had very carefully placed for maximum effect.

The water main, which was directly behind the Breaknecks, blew open.

A great wave of water struck the Breakneck Boys from behind, knocking them over and tumbling them helplessly before it. But not—and this was the crucial part of Will's plan—killing any of them.

Will, meanwhile, had spun around his bike and opened the throttle wide. He raced downslope ahead of the cascading water, cut a right so sharp he almost lost control, and was out of the cistern and roaring up a narrow electric conduit access tunnel without a single drop getting on him.

He would have liked to have seen the Breaknecks gather themselves together after the water washed them down to the bottom of the cistern. It would have been worth much to have heard their curses and witnessed their dismay as they pulled themselves up and began the long and soggy journey back aboveground. But you couldn't have everything.

Anyway, he was sure to hear of it. There was a slit-gallery, near the top of the cistern, that had been used for inspections, which was thronged with silent watchers, soldiers from the Army of Night and potential recruits from Niflheim and possibly even Hjördis herself. They'd have seen and heard everything. They'd have witnessed how he had routed their enemies without the least injury to himself. They'd want a share in his glory. They'd boast of his prowess. No longer was he merely their champion.

He was their hero now.

* * *

That evening the johatsu migrated several miles deeper into the tunnels. They moved silently and surely, and when they found their destination—an abandoned pneumatic train tube from an experimental line that went bankrupt in the Century of the Turbine—Lord Weary sent his specialists to tap into the electric and water lines. Even at this distance from the shattered main, the water pressure was lessened. But unlike the citizens above, they'd known to fill plastic bottles beforehand.

"Dockweed," Will said. A hudkin snapped to attention. "Take a couple of likely lads and scout out a good location for latrines. Not too close to the encampment. That's unsanitary." He caught Lord Weary looking at him, and hastily added, "If that's all right with you, sir."

Lord Weary waved a hand, endorsing everything. Then, placing an arm over Will's shoulder, so that it would be ostentatiously obvious to all that they two were conferring with perfect confidence, he murmured, "Dearer art thou to me, after your little escapade today, than meat and drink to a starving man. Stand by me and I shall raise you higher than you can imagine, so that my empire rests upon your shoulders. But if you ever again give orders in my presence without first deferring to me, I'll have you gutted and chained to the bedrock for the rats to eat alive. Do you understand?"

Will swallowed. "Sir."

"I would regret it, of course. But discipline knows no favorites." He released Will. "Tell me something. What exactly have we accomplished today? Other than raising morale, I mean. In a day or three, the main will be rebuilt. The Breakneck Boys are still alive. By now they're probably fast asleep in their feather beds."

"We've cut off an entire neighborhood from water for however long the repairs last. They'll take that seriously up above. If their investigations turn up the Breaknecks' involvement, it will be a political embarrassment for their parents. If not, the Breakneck Boys will still know what a close call it was. The smarter among them will realize they were given a warning. That I could as easily have killed them. We won't be seeing them back again."

"There'll be others."

Will grinned wolfishly. "Bring 'em on."

Will adapted to the darkness. He learned its ways, learned to love the stillness and the silence of it. He grew familiar with the rumor of distant trains, the small dripping and creaking and scurrying sounds that were normal to the tunnels, and the fainter and more furtive noises that were not. He learned how to crouch motionless for hours, his eyes so thoroughly adapted to the dark that when a transit worker or a patrolman went by with a flashlight, he had to narrow them to slits against its glare. He learned how to move silent as a wraith, so that he could follow these intruders from the upper world for hours without them suspecting a thing.

Nighttimes, he went upstairs to dumpster dive and sometimes to steal. Just to keep in touch with his troops. It was important for them to know that he could do the work of any one of them and did not consider it beneath him. On deep patrols, when it was not possible to go topside for food, he learned to catch and roast and eat rats. Whenever they could

spare the time, he sent his forces out to explore and to map, until he knew more of Babel's underworld than any individual ever had before. He would interview any wanderer who passed through Lord Weary's territory and those who were capable but solitary by nature he organized into a loose confederation of messengers, so that for the first time, all the johatsu communities were kept informed of each other's goings-on.

Volunteers arrived daily, anxious to serve under the hero of whom they'd heard so much. Most of them were turned away. Nevertheless, the Army of Night grew. Little by little, their territory was expanding. Bindlestiffs, sadistic cops, degenerate trolls, and other predators learned to avoid tunnels marked with the three-lines-and-a-triangle that had become the token of Captain Jack's protection.

Will knew his work was bearing fruit the day he ghosted up behind a transit cop, squeezed his upper arm in one hand, whispered softly in his ear, "My name is Jack Riddle and if you want to live, you'll place your revolver on the ground beside you and leave," and had been instantly obeyed.

That same day, one of his runners brought him a wanted poster from up above. It had a crude drawing of a fey with his grinning face-paint, hat, and skull necklace, and read:

WANTED, FOR TERRORIST ACTIVITY, THE DEMON, SPRITE, OR GAUNT KNOWN AS JACK RIDDLE

Aliases: Captain Jack Riddle, Captain Jack, Jack the Lucky, Laughing Jack

DESCRIPTION

Date of Birth: Unknown

Place of Birth: Unknown

Height: Unknown

Weight: Unknown

Build: Slim

Scars and Marks: None known

Hair: Blond

Eyes: Dark

Sex: Male

Complexion: Pale

Citizenship: Unknown

Remarks: A flamboyant dresser, Riddle's dramatic persona has led some to speculate that he may have formerly been involved in theater. By his bearing, he may once have associated with the aristocracy, possibly as a servant.

JACK RIDDLE IS BEING SOUGHT FOR HIS ROLE IN NUMEROUS TERRORIST ACTS PERFORMED IN CONNECTION WITH HIS LEADERSHIP OF A SUBTERRANEAN PARAMILITARY FORCE THAT HAS COMMITTED ASSAULTS UPON AGENTS OF HIS ABSENT MAJESTY'S GOVERNANCE AS WELL AS UPON INNOCENT MEMBERS OF THE CITIZENRY OF BABEL.

CAUTION

HE HAS A SAVAGE TEMPER AND SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS.

REWARD

His Absent Majesty's Governance is offering the informant's weight in gold to any citizen in Categories C through G or a statistically derived equivalent for all others, for information leading directly to the arrest of Jack Riddle.

"How about that?" Will said, grinning. "And to think that a couple of months ago I was a nobody!"

"Don't you get cocky, Jack," Hjördis said. "That's a lot of money. There are plenty who would turn you in for a fraction of that." She fastened her brassiere over her stomach, then slid it right way around, put her arms through the straps and shrugged into it. "I'd be tempted myself, if I didn't have obligations to my people." She wriggled into her dress.

Stung, Will said, "You shouldn't joke like that."

"You think I'm joking? That's enough wealth to buy anybody's way up to the surface."

"We don't need gold to do that. After we've consolidated the underworld, we can rise up from beneath and seize the neighborhoods above us. Then we'll take the Dread Tower, one level at a time, all the way to the Palace of Leaves."

"I realize that's Lord Weary's plan," Hjördis said doubtfully. "But how likely is it—really? I fail to understand why you would buy so completely into a fallen elf-lord's delusions of glory."

For a second Will did not speak. Then he said, "I have been driven across Fäerie Minor by chance and events, helpless as a leaf in a storm. Well, no more! I needed a cause to devote myself to, one that would give me the opportunity to strike back against my oppressors, and Lord Weary provided me with one. It's as simple as that."

He returned to the poster. "Innocent citizenry. That would be the Break-neck Boys, you think? Or the drug dealers?" Enough of their soldiers were addicted to various substances that it would be foolish to think that drug trafficking could be stopped. But the dealers were territorial and well armed, and prone to sudden violence. Johatsu had been gunned down simply because they'd wandered into the wrong tunnel at the wrong time. So the dealers had been driven upstairs. Those who cared to sell nickel bags of pixie dust or Mason jars of moonshine close by the commonly known exits were tolerated. But when their goods were tainted—when they killed—they were subject to being snatched and hauled below for a trial by the dead user's peers.

There was a polite cough outside the box's entrance. It was Jenny Jumpup. "Sir. Lord Weary's respects, and he say pull your dick out the lady-thane and assemble your raiders. He want his horses."

The clanging began in the distance, regular and unrelenting, the sound of somebody hammering on water pipes with a rock. Beyond and fainter, a second set of clangs joined it. Then a third.

"We been spotted," Jenny Jumpup said.

"Good." Will did not slow his pace. "I want them to spot us. I want them to know we're coming. I want them to know that there's nothing they can do to stop us."

"What's to keep them from slipping through the walls?" Tatterwag asked. "They're haints, after all."

"Their horses couldn't follow. We'd get them all. And these guys practically worship their horses." Lord Weary had sent ambassadors to the horse-folk, offering them full membership in his growing empire, immunity from taxation and conscription, a guaranteed supply of food, and other enticements in exchange for a small yearly tribute of horses. His advances had been rejected with haughty scorn, though the horse-folk were the poorest of all who dwelt in darkness, and possessed neither tools nor clothing.

"Then why don't they just saddle up the horses and run? That's what I'd do in their circumstances."

"They *old* haints," Jenny Jumpup said. She was a haint herself, and proud of it. Her hair was done up in a cascade of slim braids, tied in the back in a sort of ponytail, and she wore a brace of pistols butt-forward in her belt. "They ancestors left the Shadowlands before fire was brought down from the sky. They can't farm, they got no weapons, and they can't ride horses."

"So why the fuck do they care if we take them?"

"They're all the horse-folk have." Will called a brief halt to check the map. A muttered word and its lines glimmered like foxfire. The other raiders gathered about him. They were a good group—in addition to his two lieutenants, he had Radegonde de la Cockaigne, Kokudza, the Starveling, and Little Tommy Redcap. "We're on the bottommost level of tracks—but there are tunnels that delve even deeper, some of them natural and others not." He led them some fifty yards down the track. A black opening gaped to one side. Cool air sighed out of it. "This was an aqueduct once, nobody knows how long ago. Looks like dwarven work."

"It older than dwarves," Jenny Jumpup said scornfully. "My people remember. We built it. And we ain't never been paid for it neither."

"Jenny," Tatterwag said. "Give it a rest."

A train went by and they turned their backs to it. When their eyes had adjusted to the dark once more, they walked some distance into the aqueduct. Will got out the map again. "If everything's gone according to plan, our other troops will be in position *here* and *here*," he said. "That leaves only one way out—right through us. They'll stampede the herd in hopes of trampling us under."

Little Tommy Redcap chuckled nastily. "I'll rip the horses' legs off if they try."

"You were all chosen because you know how to ride," Will said. "Now space yourselves out and let's see if you can climb."

They swiftly scaled the walls. This was a new skill for Will, but one he had picked up easily. There was a narrow ledge just below the vaulted ceiling. The raiders took up positions there, some on one side and some on the other. All save Jenny Jumpup and the Starveling, who swarmed up the ceiling and drove in pitons so they could hang face downward, like bats, waiting.

After a long silence, Kokudza growled, "I don't get it. Horses. Caverns. Call me crazy, but I see a basic conflict here."

"The horses used to be wild," Will said. "Back before Nimrod laid the foundations of Babel, they fed upon the grassy slopes of Ararat. Lord Weary told me he read a paper on this once. Scientists speculate that some of their number would venture into natural caverns to feed upon mosses and lichens. This would have been tens of thousands of years ago, minimum. Something happened, an earthquake maybe, that trapped a small breeding population in the caverns. They adapted to the darkness. You couldn't say they thrived, exactly—there can't be more than a hundred of 'em all told. But they're still here. Albino-pale, short-haired, and high-strung. They won't be easy to catch."

Tatterwag patted his bandolier. "You know what *I* recommend." Now that the Empire was a going concern, they had money enough, extorted from transit workers and the like, to buy materials that had never previously been available underground. Will had been the first to keep a string of magnesium flares with him always, and a pair of welder's goggles in a breast pocket. Tatterwag, who was not only his second-in-command but a notorious suck-up as well, had followed suit. There was no better indicator of how far and fast Will's star had risen.

Will shook his head. "That won't work on these horses."

"Why not?"

"They're blind," he said. "Now be quiet."

After a while, the clanging stopped. That meant the horses would be coming soon. Some time after that, Will was almost certain that he heard a gentle murmuring noise like the rumor of rain in the distance. It was less a sound than a wistful thought. But it was there. Maybe.

"Do not take the lead horse," Lord Weary had told him quietly before they set out.

"Why shouldn't I?" Will had asked. "Surely the leader will be fastest and most desirable."

"Not so. It will be fast but callow. The wiser horses hold back and let the young stallions, their heroes, take the foremost with its attendant risks. They are expendable. The queen-mare, however, will be found at the very center of the herd, and it is she you want. Fleetest of all is she and cleverest as well, sure-footed on wet surfaces, cautious on dry, and alert to danger even when all seems safest. Wait and watch. You will know her when you see her."

Far down the tunnel, a gentle luminescence bloomed, faint as the internal glow of the ocean on a moonless night. There was a soft sound, as of many animals breathing deeply in the distance.

"Here they come," Tatterwag said.

Like sea-foam, the horses filled the tunnel. Shadowy figures ran among them, as swiftly as the beasts themselves. These were the old haints, the horse-folk, running naked as the day they were born. Even at a distance, they could be sensed, for with them came fear. Though they could not plant or build or light a fire, the old powers were theirs still, and they were able to generate terror and use it as a weapon. Thus it was that they herded their horses. Thus it was that they fought, using the great brutes' bodies against their enemies.

"Oh, baby!" Jenny Jumpup moaned. "I gone get me a young stud. I gone wrap my legs around him and never let go. I gone squeeze him so tight he rear up and scream."

"You're making me horny, Jen," Kokudza said. They all laughed softly. Then the herd was upon them.

The noise of hooves, near-silent a moment before, rose up like thunder. The horses filled the aqueduct like ocean waters surging. One by one, the raiders dropped down upon them, like ripe fruit falling from the trees.

Wait, Will thought. Wait . . . wait . . . not yet . . . And then, just when he felt he could wait no longer, he spotted the queen-mare in the center of the herd, running as quickly as any but clearly not expending herself, holding something extra in reserve.

Will leaped.

Briefly, he flew. Then, one astonishing second later, he *slammed* onto the back of the mare. He grabbed wildly for her neck and scrabbled to keep his legs on either side of her back.

The queen-mare rose up, pawing the air. Will's legs were flung clear, and he was almost thrown. But he clung to her neck, and by the time her forefeet were back on the ground, he had managed to get his own legs back in place.

She ran.

Once, twice, she slammed into the horses running to either side of her. Each time, one of Will's legs was crushed briefly between the great beasts. But the impact was not quite enough to numb them, and Will was determined that he would not be stopped by mere pain. He hung on with all his might.

Then the queen-mare had broken free of the herd and was running ahead of them all.

Riding low on her back, concentrating on keeping from falling, Will began to sing the charm he had been taught:

*"Your neck is high and straight,
Your head shrewd with intelligence,
Your belly short, your back full,
Your proud chest hard with muscles . . ."*

His mount swung her head around and tried to bite him, but he grabbed her mane high on the back of her skull with both hands and was able to keep her teeth from closing on his flesh. And then the charm took hold and she no longer tried to throw him, though she continued to run in a full-out panic.

They were alone now, separated from the herd and galloping wildly down who-knew-which lightless tunnel. Though she was blind, somehow the queen-mare knew where the walls were and did not run into them. Somehow, she never stumbled. Whatever senses she employed in the absence of sight, they were keen and shrewd, and equal to the task. Will understood now, as he had not before, why Lord Weary so desperately wanted these steeds. Will's motorcycle was of only limited utility belowground; it could not be ridden along the ties of the train tracks, nor could it leap over a sudden gap in the floor of a tunnel if Will did not spot it in time.

This beast could travel swiftly anywhere. It could traverse the distance between settlements in a fraction of the time a pedestrian could.

*"Joy of princes, throne of warriors,
Hoof-fierce treasure of the rich,
Eternal comfort to the restless . . ."*

There were hundreds of lines to this charm, and if Will were to skip even one, it would not work. He had labored hard to memorize them all. Now, as he neared the final stanzas, Will felt the thoughts of the queen-mare like a silvery brook flowing alongside his own. They were coming together now, moving as one, muscle upon muscle, thought on thought, a breath away from being a single shared essence in two bodies.

*"Riding seems easy to he who rests indoors
But courageous to he who travels the high-roads
On the back of a sturdy horse."*

She was breathing hard now. Horses could only run at a full gallop for brief periods of time, though those who did not know them imagined them continuing thus for hours on end. The queen-mare was winded—Will could feel a sympathetic pain in his own chest—and if she did not stop soon and walk it off, she would run until her great heart burst within her.

This was the moment of crisis. Will had to convince her that accepting him as a rider was preferable to death.

Laying his cheek alongside her neck, still singing, he closed his eyes and entered her thoughts. There was neither color nor light in the queen-mare's world, but her sensorium was wider and more varied than his own, for she was possessed of a dozen fractional senses. Riding her mind, he felt the coolness coming off of the walls, and the dampness or dryness of the ground before them. Tiny electrical charges lying dormant in the conduits and steel catwalks that flashed past tickled faintly against his awareness. Variant densities in the air slowed or sped sounds passing through it. Smells arrived in his nostrils with the precise location of their origins. Braids of scent and sound and feel wound together to give him a perfect picture of his surroundings.

Now Will thought back to the farmlands outside his old village, and recalled the dusty green smell of their fields and the way that in late afternoon the sun turned the seeded tops of the grasses into living gold. He pictured the cold, crystalline waters of a stream running swiftly through a tunnel of greenery and exploding under the hooves of his borrowed mount. He called up the flickering flight of butterflies among the wild flowers in a sudden clearing, and then an orchard with gnarled old apple trees and humble-bees droning tipsily among the half-fermented windfalls. This was something the queen-mare had never experienced, nor ever could. But the desire for it was in her blood and her bones. It was written into her genes.

He sang the last words of the charm. Now, he found himself murmuring into the queen-mare's ear.

"Ohhhh, sweet lady," Will crooned. "You and I, mother of horses . . . we were meant to be. Share your strong back with me, let me ride you, and I will show you such sights every time we travel together."

He could feel the tug of his words on her. He could feel her resolve weakening.

"I'll take good care of you, I promise. Oats every day and never a saddle nor a bit. I'll rub you down and comb your mane and plait your tail. No door shall ever lock you in. You'll have fresh water to drink, and clean straw to sleep on."

He was stroking the side of her neck with one hand now. She was skittish still, but Will could feel the warmth of feeling welling up within her. "And this above all," he whispered: "No one shall ever ride you but me."

Gently, tentatively, he felt her pleasure at the thought. Joyously, confidently, he showed her his own pleasure that she felt thus about him. Self flowed into self, so that the distinction between fey and horse, he and her, dissolved.

They were one now.

Will discovered that he was weeping. It had to be for joy because the emotion that filled him now and that threatened to burst his chest asunder was anything but unhappiness. "What's your name, darling?" he whispered, ignoring the tears running down his cheeks. "What should I call you, my sweet?" But horses had no names, either true or superficial, for themselves. They lived in a universe without words. For them, there could be no lies or falsehoods, because things were simply so. Which meant that the task of naming her fell upon Will.

"I shall call you Epona," he said, "Great Lady of Horses."

For the first time since he could not remember when, he felt completely happy.

Will was in no hurry to return to the Army of Night's current bivouac. Epona was the swiftest of her breed; he would not arrive last. "Take me where I need to be," he whispered in her ear. "But slowly." Then he gave the queen-mare her head.

They made their way home through pleasant and winding paths. Occasionally, a lone electric bulb or a line of fluorescent tubes flickered weakly to life before them, floated silently by, and then faded to nothing behind them. Once, Epona daintily picked her way up a long-forgotten marble staircase with crystal chandeliers that loomed from the shadows overhead like the ghosts of giant jellyfish. They went down a long passage of rough stone so low that Epona had to bow her head to get through. Twice the ceiling brushed against Will's back, as he clung tightly to her. Yet, though their path seemed roundabout, Will was the first to return to camp. He had but to picture their destination in his mind, and the queen-mare knew the fastest and safest way there.

They emerged from the catacombs under Battery Park and were home.

Radegonde de la Cockaigne arrived second. She had come from the contested lands of the West, as had Will, but a little of the blood of *les bonnes meres* flowed in her veins and she had grown up privileged. She had been taught to ride, rather than learning on stolen time, and as a result her horse-craft was far superior to his. He was not surprised to see that she had wooed and won a particularly mettlesome steed. After her came Kokudza and Jenny Jumpup, also mounted, and then the Starveling and Little Tommy Redcap, both afoot. Some time later, Tatterwag limped in, looking embarrassed. They had gained four horses and lost not a single life.

* * *

Lord Weary came out of Hjördis's box, buckling his belt.

Will made his report.

"Any fatalities?" Lord Weary asked. Then, when Will shook his head, he said, "Let's see the horses."

Will had commandeered a space that was said to have been used once as a holding pen for slave smugglers, and then sent forces aboveground to steal, scavenge, or, in last resort, buy straw to spread on the floor. Lord Weary touched the steel-jacketed door that Will hadn't yet ordered taken off its hinges and muttered, "Good. It'll need a bar, though."

Then Weary saw the horses and a rare smile spread over his pale face.

"They're magnificent!" he said. "I had hoped for five, and been willing to settle for three. *Felicitas in media est*, eh? It's a sign."

Seen together, it was obvious that the four steeds were from the same genetic line. The heads were gaunt and narrow, with large blue veins under pale, translucent skin. Their eyes bulged like tennis balls under lids that had grown together and would never open. All glowed faintly in the darkness. Yet equally clear was it that the one was queen and the others her subjects.

Lord Weary went straight to Epona and peeled back her lips to examine her teeth. "This one is best," he said at last. "She shall be mine."

Will trembled, but said nothing.

"First things first. Measure her for a saddle and bit."

"Sir!" His aide-de-camp, a haint named Chittiface, clicked his heels and saluted.

"The others too, of course. They're still as wild as so many winds, and will need training. Have them broken and gentled. But take care to use no more force than is necessary. For they are my own precious children and I'll not have them scarred or disfigured." He turned on Will and said, "Captain Riddle, I perceive that I have in some way offended you."

"How can a lord offend his captain?" Will said carefully. "One might as well declare that I have offended my hand, or that I act against the best wishes of my left leg. Can the liver and entrails resent the wise leadership of King Head? 'Tis beyond my imagining."

The stables-to-be were swarming with soldiers, many busy, but the greater number merely curious to see the horses. Will noted that all of his fellow raiders were here as well. And every man-jack and lady-jill was pretending not to listen.

"Oh, glib, most monstrous glib indeed!" Lord Weary turned a stern face upon Will. "And yet such a litany of sighs and shudders and tics, of soft gasps and shakes of the head, of sudden winces and tightened lips and suppressed retorts have I seen from you as speaks louder than mere words ever could. You are displeased. With me."

"If so, milord, then I apologize most humbly."

"Humbly, sirrah? You defy me to my teeth and plead humility? I'll not have it. Lie to me a third time at your peril."

"But—"

"Kneel!" Weary said, and then, when Will obeyed, "Both knees!"

Lord Weary was Will's liege, and Will had knelt before him often. But always, as became one of his officers, on a single knee. The ground here

was wet and unclean, and the damp filth soaked through the cloth where the knee touched it. There was only one reason for Will to be made to kneel on two knees, and that was so that he might be humiliated.

"Now," Lord Weary said. "As I am your liege and you owe me obedience, speak. Tell me what I have done."

"Lord, these words are nothing I would willingly say. But as you command, so must I obey." Simply, then, and without recrimination, Will explained what promises he had made to Epona, and concluded, "What touches my honor is mine alone, and cannot entail yours. I ask only that you consider these matters seriously."

Lord Weary heard him through. Then he said, "Seize him."

Rough hands gripped Will by either arm. The soldier to his left was a new recruit, but the one to his right was Jenny Jumpup. She did not meet his eyes.

"Strip him to the waist," Lord Weary commanded. "Give him five lashes for insolence."

Will lay on his stomach, eyes closed, marveling at the intensity of his own pain. He had retreated to his spare and soldierly nest, built of stacked cardboard, clothesline, and charity blankets on a rarely-used catwalk that swayed and rattled every time a train passed underneath. It vibrated now as footsteps noisily clanged up the metal rungs from below.

"We brought you water." A refilled two-liter Pepsi bottle thumped down by Will's chest. Tatterwag sat down at the tent's entrance, folding his long legs beneath him. Jenny Jumpup sat down beside him. "I couldn't come see you sooner because Weary gave me double-shift guarding his new horses. I was dead on my feet by the time I was relieved, so I just crawled in my box and collapsed."

With a groan, Will sat up. He took a swig from the bottle and waited.

At last Jenny Jumpup blurted, "He got no right to do that to you!"

"He has every right. But he was wrong to employ those rights in this instance."

Jenny snorted and looked away dismissively. Tatterwag's mouth moved silently as he worked out the implications of that statement. Then, quietly, he said, "It's war."

"Eh?"

"Lord Weary has closed the underworld to everyone but johatsu. Not just the police—transit, sewage, water, gas, and electrical workers too. If they refuse to leave, Lord Weary says, they're to be beaten. Orders are to mark them up good, so that if they return we'll know to kill 'em."

"That's crazy. We've always kept on good terms with the maintenance crews. They can come and go as they wish. Even the cops we don't kill. We let them know who runs things down here, but we don't threaten their safety. That's been the keystone of our polity."

"Not any more," Jenny Jumpup said. "Lord Weary say once we seize control of their transit and utilities, the uplanders ain't got no choice but to negotiate a peace."

"They'll have no choice but to exterminate us." Closing his eyes made

Will's head spin. When he opened them, he was still dizzy. "Has Lord Weary gone mad?"

"Maybe so." Tatterwag leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Some of us think that. And if he's mad, what loyalty do we owe him? None! Maybe this is an opportunity. Some of us think that maybe it's time for a regime change."

"Regime change?"

"A coup d'etat. You think, Will! You're close enough to him. He trusts you. Slide a knife between his ribs and the problem goes away."

"It *sounds* simple," Will said carefully. Particularly, he did not say, for those who need have nothing to do with the deed but to urge him on to it. "But I doubt its practicality. Lord Weary's troops would tear me apart if I pulled a stunt like that."

"You've got backing among the officers. We talked this through, didn't we, Jenny?"

She nodded.

"They're prepared to acclaim you. This is your moment, Will. You call the Army of Night together and give 'em a speech—you're good with words, they'll listen to you—and Lord Weary is done and forgotten."

Will shook his head. He was about to explain that Tatterwag's idea wouldn't work because Lord Weary had just started a war and consequently was more popular now than he'd ever been before or would ever be again. But then a train slammed by underfoot, making speech impossible. By the time the catwalk stopped shivering and the diesel fumes had begun to dissipate, he found that he had slumped down onto his bed again and his eyes were closed and his mouth would not form words at his command.

A random thought went by and he followed it into the realm of dreams.

In his dreams, the commanders of the mosstroopers were gathered around a table, staring down at a map of the underworld that was nowhere near so detailed or accurate as his own, though reliable enough, he could see, on the major and more recent excavations. One of them indicated the mouth of the tunnel where the sub-surface route broke into the outer world and became a trolley line. "We'll enter here—" his hand skipped lightly down the map, tapping three of the larger subway stations—"and at Bowling Green, Tartarus, and Third Street Stations. The stations in between we can lock down to prevent Lord Weary's riffraff from retreating to the surface."

"That still leaves his rats a thousand bolt-holes, most of which are unknown to us."

"Let them break and run, so long as we shatter their army and account for their leaders."

They all bent over the map, their granite faces as large as cathedrals, their moustaches the size of boxcars. "What of Jack Riddle? He looks feverish."

Lying helpless beneath their stony gazes, pinned between parallel lines of ink, Will saw a hand come down out of the darkness, growing larger and larger until it filled his sight and then continued to swell so that it

disappeared from his ken, all save one enormous finger. It was wreathed with blue flames so that the air about it wavered and snapped like a flag in a gale. "This bug?" said its owner contemptuously.

The finger touched the map and Will felt flames engulf him.

Will's eyes flew open. Tatterwag and Jenny Jumpup were gone and Hjördis knelt by his side. With hands sure and familiar she rubbed balm over his wounds. The pain flared up like fire where she touched him, and sank down to an icy residue where her hands had passed. The smell, flowery and medicinal, lingered.

"You are so good to me," Will murmured.

"It's nothing personal," Hjördis replied.

"Why do you always *say* things like that?"

"Because they're true. There is nothing special or privileged about our relationship. You are our hero and so I have body-rights over you, as I did with Bonecrusher before you, and as I have over Lord Weary even now. You in turn take tribute from each new community you conquer, yes? A lei of orchids, freely offered and freely taken. Settle for that."

Will stayed silent until Hjördis finished applying the balm. Then he said, "They say there's going to be war."

"Yes, I know. Lord Weary came for the crates of rifles we were holding for him. This time there was no brash young stranger to offer an alternative. So it's war. If you care to call it that."

"What else would you call it?"

"Idiocy. But I will not be here to see it. The johatsu are leaving. The tunnels are emptying out as all the communities up and down their lengths desert them for the upper world. I have sent ahead as many of my own folk as have the sense to leave. Now I am visiting the last holdouts, the obstinate and demented, one by one. When I have spoken to them all I will leave myself."

"Where will you go?"

"There are shelters above. Some will sleep in stairwells. Others in the streets. Come with me."

"You can't leave just because there is danger," Will said. "This is your nation!"

"I have never believed in Lord Weary's fantasies. My folk are not warriors, but the weak and the broken who fled down below to find some semblance of safety," Hjördis said. "As their thane, I cannot forget that."

"Tatterwag wants me to lead a revolt against Lord Weary." Said aloud, it sounded unreal. "He wants me to kill Weary, win over the troops with a speech, and then take control of the Army of Night and lead them upward against our oppressors."

"Yes, Tatterwag would, wouldn't he? It's how he thinks."

"Perhaps I should give his plan some thought. It could be tweaked."

"You're overheated." Hjördis rose. "I will leave the balm here; use it when the pain returns. Don't wear a shirt until the welts have healed. Avoid alcohol. Leave before Lord Weary's war begins."

"I can't abandon my troops. I've fought alongside them, I've—"

"My work here is done," Hjördis said. "You will not see me again." She

started down the ladder. Before the sound of her feet on the rungs had echoed into silence, Will was asleep.

When he awoke, Lord Weary was sitting beside him, smoking. His pale, shrewd face looked oddly detached. Groggily, Will sat up.

"You could kill me," Lord Weary said. "But what advantage would it bring you?"

He passed his cigarette to Will, who took a long drag and passed it back. His back still burned terribly, but the balm Hjördis had applied took some of the edge off the pain.

"You're only a hero, after all. I am a conqueror and someday I may yet be an emperor. I know how to rule and you don't. That's the long and the short of it. Without me, the Army of Night would fall apart in a week. The alliances I have formed and the tributes I demand are all imposed by force of my own personality. Kill me and you lose everything that we have built together."

"I don't think I could kill you."

"No," Lord Weary said. "Not in cold blood, certainly."

It was true. Inexplicably, Will's heart still went out to Lord Weary. He thought he could gladly die for the old elf. Yet the anger remained. "Why did you have me whipped?"

"It was salutary for the troops to see you punished. You drew my Army's admiration and then their loyalty. Therefore it was necessary for me to establish who was liege and who his hound. Had you not defied me on the horse, I would have found another excuse. This is *my* delusion, not yours."

"Excuse me?"

"You asked me once how I came to this sad estate, living in darkness, eating rats and stale donuts, and bedding gutter-haints, and you did not like my answer then. Allow me to try again. Anyone can see I'm high-elf. Most of my soldiers think my title was self-assumed, but I assure you it was mine by birth. How could one of my blood and connections ever end up," he gestured, "... here?"

"How?"

"It began one morning in the Palace of Leaves," Lord Weary said. "I awoke early to find that the servants had opened all the windows, for it was a perfect day whose breezes were as light and comfortable upon the skin as the water of a sun-warmed lake. I slipped quietly from my bed so as not to disturb my mistresses and, donning a silk kimono, went out onto the balcony. The sun lay low upon the horizon, so that half the land was in light and half in shadow, and at the very center of the world, its focus and definition, was ... me.

"A vast and weightless emptiness overcame me then, a sensation too light to be called despair but too pitiless to be anything else. The balcony had only a low marble railing—it barely came up to my waist—and it was the easiest thing imaginable to step atop it. I looked down the tapering slope of Babel at the suburbs and tank farms below, hidden here and there by patches of mist, marveling that I could see them at all from such a height. It would be too strong a word to say that I felt an urge to step off. Call it a whim.

"So I did.

"But so illusory did the world seem to me in the mood I was in that it had no hold upon me whatsoever. Even gravity could not touch me. I stepped into the air and there I stood. Unmoving.

"And in that instant I faced my greatest peril, for I felt my comprehension expanding to engulf the entire world."

"I don't understand," Will said.

"There is a single essence that animates all that lives, from the tiniest mite eking out a barren existence upon the desert-large shell of another mite too small to see with the naked eye, to the very pinnacle of existence, my own humble and lordly self. It informs even inanimate matter, a simple *I am* that lets a boulder know that it is a boulder, a mountain that it is a mountain, a pebble that it is pebble. Otherwise, all would be flux and change.

"The body, you know, is 90 percent water, and there are those who will tell you that life is only a device that water employs to move itself about. When you die, that water returns to the earth and via natural processes is drawn up into the air, where it eventually joins up with waters that were once snakes, camels, emperors . . . and rains down again, perhaps to join a stream that becomes a river that flows into the sea. Sooner or later, all but your dust will inevitably return to world-girding Oceanus.

"Similarly, when you die your life-force combines with that of everyone else who has ever died or is yet to be born. Like so many lead soldiers being melted down to form a molten ocean of potential."

Will shook his head. "It is a difficult thing to believe."

"No, it is easy to believe. But it is hard, impossibly hard, to *know*. For to recognize the illusory nature of your own being is to flirt with its dissolution. To become one with everything is to become nothing specific at all. Almost, I ceased to be. I experienced then an instant of absolute terror as fleeting and pure as the flash of green light at sunset.

"In that same instant, I spun on my heel and took two steps down to the balcony. I left the Palace of Leaves and went to a bar and got roaring drunk. For I had seen beneath the mask of the world and *there was nothing there!* Since which time, I have distracted myself with debauchery and dreams. I dreamt up the Army of Night and then I dreamt a world for it to conquer. Finally, I dreamt for it a champion—you."

"With all respect, sir, I had a life before we met."

"You were chased into my arms," Lord Weary said, lighting a new cigarette from the butt of the old one. "Didn't it seem strange to you how you were pursued by one anonymous enemy after another? What had you done to deserve such treatment? Can you name your crime?" He flicked the butt out into the air over the tracks. "I have been, I fear, your persecutor-general and the architect of all your sorrows. I am the greatest villain you have ever known."

"If you are a villain," Will said, "then you are a strange one indeed, for I still love you as if you were my own uncle." Even now, he was not lying. "I hate much about you—your power, your arrogance, your former wealth. I despise the way you use others for your own amusement. And yet . . . I cannot deny my feelings for you."

For an unguarded instant, Lord Weary looked old and jaded. His fingers trembled with palsy and his eyes were vacant. Then he cocked his head and a great and terrible warmth filled him again. "Then I shall swear here and now that when I come to power, you shall be paid for all. What is it you want? Think carefully and speak truly, and it shall be yours."

"I want to see you sitting on the Obsidian Throne."

"That is an evasion. Why should that be more important to you than money or power?"

"Because in order for you to reach such a height would require a great slaughter among the Lords of the Mayoralty, such that the Liosalfar and the Dockalfar and even the Council of Magi would be depopulated."

"Again, why?"

Will ducked his head. In a small voice, he said, "My parents were in Brocieland Station when the dragons came and dropped golden fire on the rail yards. My life was destroyed by a war-machine that may have been on that very run. After I was driven out of it, my village was torched by the Armies of the Mighty. All these forces were in the employ of the Lords of Babel and the war itself the result of their mad polity." He looked up, eyes brimming with hatred. "Kill them all! Destroy those responsible, and I shall ask for not a scintilla more from you."

"My dear, sweet Jack." Lord Weary took Will in his arms and stroked his hair caressingly. "I can deny you nothing." He rose to his feet. "Now my war has begun and whether it is real or not, you have your part to play in it. Stand."

"Yes, sir," Will said. Painfully he stood. Bright spots swam in his eyes.

"Put your shirt and jacket on. I'll have the medic shoot you up with witchwart and lidocaine so you can fight."

Lord Weary established his headquarters in the catacombs. In a small room lined with bone-filled vaults and smokily lit by ancient lamps filled with recycled motor oil, he went over the maps with his captains, utilizing a cyclops skull as a makeshift table. They'd placed scouts at all the places where the mosstroopers might profitably begin their attack. There were countless ways in and out of the subterranean world, of course, but very few that would admit military forces in any number.

While the troops assembled rifles, made Molotov cocktails, and folded bandanas and soaked them in water so they could be tied about their faces as a defense against tear gas, their superiors planned an ambush and counterattack. Will had his doubts about the effectiveness of their forces, for he had seen soldiers snorting pixie dust and smoking blunts even as they prepared their weapons. Worse, the more he heard of his commander's plans, the less he trusted them. The tunnels were perfect for guerrilla warfare—wait for the enemy to be overextended and bored, then strike swiftly from the darkness and flee. Direct confrontation meant giving up that advantage. But Lord Weary's compulsion was strong upon him, and in the end Will had no choice but to obey.

So it was that Will found himself upon his motorcycle as part of a small advance force that watched from the shadows as the mosstroopers poured down from the Third Street platform and onto the tracks. The sta-

tion had been closed, the trains redirected, and the power to the third rail cut. The troopers took up their positions in what looked to Will to be a thoroughly professional manner. They were every one of them Tylwyth Teg—disciplined, experienced, and well-trained. They wore black helmets and carried plexi shields. Gas grenades hung from their belts and holstered pistols as well.

The mosstroopers advanced in staggered ranks, with the dire wolves in the front row, straining at their leashes. It looked for all the world as if the wolves were pulling the troopers forward.

Will watched and waited.

Then, in his distant catacomb sanctum, where he sat scrying the scene in a bowl of ink, Lord Weary spoke a Word which Will could feel in the pit of his stomach.

A sorcerous wind came blowing up from the throat of the earth. It lifted the newspapers and handbills littering the ground and gave them wings, so that they flapped wildly and flew directly into the faces of the mosstroopers like so many ghostly chickens and pelicans. Ragged items of discarded clothing picked themselves up and began to stagger toward the invaders. Coming up out of nowhere as they had, the sorcerous nothings must have looked like a serious magical attack.

Two soldiers, both combat mages by the testimony of their uniforms, stepped forward and raised titanium staves against the oncoming paper birds and cloth manikins. As one, they spoke a Word of their own.

All in an instant, the wind died and the newspapers and old clothes burst into powder.

That was Will's cue. He held a magnesium flare ready in one hand and his lighter in the other. Now, before the mages' staves could recharge, he flipped open his Zippo one-handed and struck a light. Then he pulled the welder's goggles over his eyes and shouted, "Heads down!"

The snipers, who did not have goggles of their own, covered their eyes with their arms. The five cavalry lit and threw their flares.

"Go!" Will screamed.

He opened the throttle too fast and his Kawasaki stalled out. Cursing, he kick-started it back to life.

The plan of attack was simplicity itself: In the instant that their defenses were depleted, hit the mosstroopers and their wolves with magnesium flares, then charge the center of their line while they were still blinded. There, the powerful bodies of the horses would break a way through, spreading confusion in their wake. They were to continue onward without stopping and around the bend beyond Third Street Station, disappearing up the tunnel. This would leave the enemy easy targets for Will's sharpshooters. Or so it was planned.

In practice, it didn't work out that way.

Will had lost only seconds by stalling his bike. But in that delay, the horses had outpaced him. Now he saw them overwhelmed by the dire wolves that the blinded mosstroopers had released. Relying on scent rather than sight, those fierce predators met the horses in the air, snarling and snapping, sinking their great teeth into pale throats and haunches.

The first to fall was Epona.

He heard her scream, and saw both horse and rider buried in black-furred furies. The rider, a nonentity named Mumpoker, died almost immediately but his noble steed bit and kicked even as she went down. Not far behind her, Hengroen and Holvarpnia were also overwhelmed. Will saw Jenny Jumpup leap free of Embarr, collide with a dire wolf in mid-air and fall with the wolf beneath her and both her hands at its throat.

Will opened the throttle wide. Yelling, he drove toward Epona and the fallen riders, hoping to achieve he knew not what. But then tear-gas canisters fell clattering to the ground and a wall of chemical mist rolled forward and into his troops. The bandana that Will wore provided little protection. Fiery tears welled up, and he could not see. Desperately, he tried to spin his motorcycle about. The bike skidded on its side and almost slid out from under him. His Zippo flew skittering away.

Will struggled to right the motorcycle.

All about him the dire wolves were fighting and hunting. Though the brutes could not see and their sense of smell had been neutralized by the tear gas, they were yet deadly to any combatant they chanced to stumble into.

A wolf's paws landed on Will's handlebars. All in a panic he raised his pistol and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

He had forgotten the safety.

The dire wolf grinned, baring sharp white fangs. "If you're going to piss yourself, best do it now," it said. "Because you're about to die."

The hideous jaws were about to close on Will's face when the wolf abruptly grunted and half its head disappeared in red spray.

"Some fun, huh, Captain?" Jenny Jumpup grinned madly at Will, then stuffed her pistol in her belt and reached out a hand toward him.

Will pulled her up behind him on the motorcycle. "Let's get the fuck out of here!" he shouted.

They did.

That was the war's first action. Will's snipers had retreated in disarray before the advancing mosstroopers without firing a single shot. The horses entrusted him were dead and their riders, all but one, dead or captured. It was a fiasco and, worse, it deserved to be one. Lord Weary's soldiers were only half-trained and their tactics were makeshift at best. They couldn't go up against a disciplined military force like the mosstroopers and expect anything but defeat. That was obvious to Will now.

The guttering flares died to nothing behind them and the dire wolves were called back to their handlers. Will pocketed his goggles. The mosstroopers would continue to advance, he knew, but at a cautious pace. Since they were no longer in immediate danger, he throttled down his bike to a less dangerous speed. Thus, he was able to react in time when Jenny Jumpup murmured, "I think I gone pass out now," and started to slide from the pillion.

Will twisted around to grab Jenny Jumpup with one arm, while simultaneously slamming on the brake. Somehow, he managed to bring the Kawasaki to a stop without dropping her.

Pushing down the kickstand with his heel, Will dismounted and lowered his lieutenant to the ground. Semicircles of blood soaked through her blouse and trousers, more than he could count.

"Oh, shit," he muttered.

Jenny Jumpup's eyes flickered open. She managed a wan smile. "Hey. You should see the wolf." Then her eyes deadened and her face went slack.

He bandaged her as best he could and then, mating her belt with his, improvised a pistol-belt carry. Bent over beneath her weight, he staggered onto the cycle and got it going again. He dared not stay in the path of the mosstroopers, and he would not leave her behind.

Into the dark they rode.

Once, briefly, Jenny Jumpup regained consciousness. "I got something to confess, Captain," she said. "When Lord Weary whipped you? I enjoyed it."

Shaken, Will said, "I'm sorry if I—"

"Oh, I didn't mean that in a bad way." Jenny Jumpup was silent for a long time. Then she said, "It kinda turned me on. Maybe when this is all over, we can . . ." Then she was out again. Will twisted around and saw that her skin was grey.

"Hang in there. I'll have you to a medic soon."

Will rode as fast and furious as ever he had before.

Some distance down the tunnel, Tatterwag stepped out of the gloom in front of the Kawasaki. And so Will was reunited with those of his snipers who had not simply thrown away their rifles and fled but had retreated with some shred of order. Besides Tatterwag, they were Sparrowgrass, Drumbelo, the Starveling, and Xylia of Arcadia.

Carefully, Will lowered Jenny Jumpup's body to the ground. "See to her wounds," he said. "They were honorably gotten."

Xylia of Arcadia knelt over Jenny. Then she stood and touched her head, heart, and crotch. "She's dead."

Will stared down at the corpse. It was a grey and pathetic thing. Jenny Jumpup's clothes were dark with blood and, deprived of her personality, her face was dull and ordinary. Had he not carried it here on his back, Will would have sworn the body was not hers.

After a long silence, Tatterwag stooped over the body. "I'll take her pistols for a keepsake." He stuck them in his belt.

"I'll take her boots," Xylia of Arcadia said. "They won't fit me, but I know somebody they will."

One by one they removed Jenny Jumpup's things. Will took her cigarettes and lighter and Drumbelo her throwing knife. The Starveling took her trousers and tunic. That left only a small silver orchid hung on a chain about her neck, which Sparrowgrass solemnly kissed and stuffed into a jeans pocket. They looked at one another uneasily, and then Will cleared his throat. "*From the south she came.*"

"*The bird, the warlike bird,*" said Xylia of Arcadia.

"*With whirring wings,*" said Drumbelo.

"*She wishes to change herself,*" said the Starveling.

"*Back to the body of that swift bird,*" said Tatterwag.

"*She throws away her body in battle,*" Sparrowgrass concluded.

Already, freed of her élan vital and any lingering attachment to her possessions, Jenny Jumpup's body was sinking into the ground. Slowly at first, and then more quickly, it slid downward into the darkness of the earth from which it had come and to which all would someday inevitably return. Haints more literally than others, perhaps, but the truth was universal.

The staging area, when they finally got there, was in an uproar. The platforms swarmed with haints, feys, and gaunts, carrying crates, barrels, and railroad ties to add to the growing barricades, and moving guns and munitions to hastily improvised emplacements. One leather-winged night gaunt flew up the tunnel from which Will's company had just emerged, with a dispatch box in its claws. Will's heart sank to see how amateurish it all looked.

Porte Molitor Station had seemed a good base because it was located where the A, C, and E lines split from Routes 1, 2, and 3 and was not far downline from the sub-surface exit, thus giving easy access to all four potential war zones. But Porte Molitor was a ghost station, built but never used, and so it did not open to the surface. Now, with retreating soldiers converging from every front and scouts reporting that the enemy was advancing through all three tunnels, it seemed to Will like nothing so much as a trap.

"Who's in charge here?" Will shouted. "What are all these soldiers doing on the tracks? Isn't anybody in charge?"

"Lord Weary has placed Captain Hackem in command of the defenses for the left Uptown tunnel," a weary-looking hulder said. "Chittiface is responsible for the right Uptown tunnel. And he himself commands the forces defending the Downtown tunnel. Hello, Jack."

"Hjördis!" Will cried in astonishment. "You're back."

"Everybody's back. All the johatsu who fled have returned to the tunnels, without exception."

"But *why*?" Earlier, Will had urged the lady-thane not to abandon Lord Weary's cause. Now he knew his counsel had been wrong. She had left and been right to do so. She should have stayed away.

"I don't know." Hjördis looked stricken. "It defies all reason. Perhaps there is a compulsion on us. But if so, it is of a force greater than any I have ever known or heard rumor of, for it drives a multitude."

"Where is Lord Weary? If anybody understands this mystery, it will be he."

"Lord Weary charges you to consult with him before the battle begins. On what matter, he does not say." Hjördis turned away. "Now I must go. I have a field hospital to oversee."

Will watched her leave. Then he turned to Tatterwag and held out a hand. "Give me your combat knife."

Knife in hand, Will clambered over the barricade and kick-started his bike. Then, though it broke his heart to do so, he plunged the knife into the fuel tank. Gasoline sprayed into the air and drenched the ground. Up and down the tracks he rode. The ties made it a teeth-rattling ride and spread the gasoline from wall to wall before the Kawasaki sputtered to a stop.

"There!" he roared when he was done. "Now, when the hell-hounds come sniffing after us, this will render them nose-deaf!"

That done, he strode off to confront Lord Weary, Tatterwag in tow.

The Downtown tunnel fortifications were simpler than the Uptown barricades—a single barrier that reached almost to the ceiling, without crenels or even a walkway along its top—but correspondingly more massive. He found Little Tommy Redcap overseeing the work there in Lord Weary's place. Johatsu carried box after box to the I-beams and duct-taped them to the foot of the supports. Others ran electrical wires from box to box. They could only be explosive devices.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Will demanded.

"What the fuck does it look like I'm doing?" Little Tommy Redcap lifted his voice: "Yo! I need more primers here!"

"It looks like you're preparing to bring half the buildings in the Bowery crashing down on our heads."

The haint who came running up with the box of primers was puffing on a lit cigar. Little Tommy Redcap snatched it from the johatsu's mouth and started to fling it away. Then he stopped and stuck it in his own mouth instead. "If you knew, why did you ask?"

"If this is done by Lord Weary's orders, then he's crazy," Will said. "If you touch those things off, you'll kill us all."

"You think I'm afraid of dying?" Little Tommy Redcap laughed and then tapped the ashes from his cigar onto the primers for emphasis. "It's a good day to die!"

"You're crazy too."

"Maybe so, but I still got things to do. You got any complaints—" Little Tommy Redcap jerked a thumb upward—"take 'em up with the Big Guy."

High overhead was a gallery that Will did not remember seeing before, in a wall that was taller than it could possibly be. (The station seemed larger too—but he had no time to worry on it.) Lord Weary's face was a pale oval afloat in the darkness like an indifferent moon gazing down upon the wickedness of the world. "I will," he said. "How do I get up there?"

There was a stairwell that Will had never seen before. Two insect-headed guards in green leather armor uncrossed their pikes for him but re-crossed them when Tatterwag tried to follow. Leaving his lieutenant behind to argue, Will took the steps two and three at a time. Heart pounding—when had he last rested?—he burst into the gallery.

Lord Weary was leaning over a marble balustrade, contemplating the scene below. He glanced up briefly. "Join me."

A strange lassitude overcame Will and all sense of urgency left him. It was as if in the presence of his liege he had no ambitions of his own. Unhurriedly, he joined the elf-lord. Together they gazed down on the scurrying johatsu. A salt breeze blew up, dispelling the stagnant air of the tunnels. It seemed to Will that he caught a hint of flowers as well. An unseen sun was warm upon his back. "What place is this?"

"A memory, and nothing more. My attention wanders, I fear." Suddenly they stood in a clean, empty room of white marble. A light wind flowed through its high windows. A black absence sat at its center. From some angles it looked like a chair.

"Is that—?"

"Yes. You behold the Obsidian Throne." The air darkened and the vision faded, returning Will to the stale smells and staler prospects of his life underground. Briefly, Lord Weary was silent. Then he said, "The final conflict approaches. Can you hear it coming?"

Will could. "What's that sound?" he asked. "That . . . howling."

"Just watch."

The howling grew until it became a quartet of train whistles shrieking almost in synch. Louder they grew, and louder still. The thunder of iron wheels filled the station. The ground underfoot trembled with premonition.

Then the Uptown barricades exploded. Fragments of beams, barrels, and soldiers were flung into the air as locomotives smashed through the hastily assembled defenses.

There were four of the great beasts, running in unison, with plows affixed to the fronts of their cabs, and they did not slow as they passed through the station. Shoulder to shoulder they sped, grinding troops under their wheels. At the Downtown tunnel, they crashed through the barricade and its defenders and, with final triumphant howls, rushed headlong into darkness, leaving hundreds dead in their wake.

Will clutched the balustrade, his eyes starting from his head. The screams and shouts of the survivors echoed and re-echoed in his ears like surf. He could not master his thoughts; they tumbled over each other in meaningless cascades. "You knew this would happen," he said finally, fighting back nausea. "You *arranged* this."

Lord Weary smiled sadly. He leaned over the railing and shouted, "Redcap!"

In the wake of the trains had come the mosstroopers. Somebody fired a magnesium flare at the first squadron to arrive, setting afire the gasoline Will had sprayed throughout the tunnel. But it did not stop them. Burning and ravening, the dire wolves entered Porte Molitor and began killing the survivors. Behind them came the mosstroopers, weapons ready.

Yet amid all this confusion, Lord Weary's voice carried to its target. Little Tommy Redcap looked up from the smoldering body of a dying wolf. "Sir?"

"Are the explosives ready?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

"Stand by the igniter and await my command."

"Sir!" Little Tommy Redcap turned and disappeared into the fleeing, fighting, panicking mob.

So great was Will's befuddlement then that it did not surprise him to see Tatterwag leap from the stairwell with blood on his jacket and Jenny Jumpup's pistols in his hands. "Traitor!" he cried, and discharged them both point-blank at Lord Weary's head.

"Ah," the elf-lord sighed. "Like so many things, this moment was far more pleasing in the anticipation than in its realization." He opened a hand and there lay the two freshly fired pistol balls.

He let them drop to the floor.

"You bore me."

All color drained from the swamp gaunt's face. Pleadingly, he raised his hands and shook his head. With neither hurry nor reluctance, Lord Weary reached toward him. His fingers closed not upon Tatterwag, however, but around a filthy old greatcoat. With a moue of distaste, he tossed it over the balustrade.

"What did you just do?" Will asked, shocked. "How did you do that?"

Hjördis stepped from the stairwell, as Tatterwag had a minute before. "He's a glamour-wallah," she said. "Aren't you?"

Lord Weary smiled and shrugged. "I was the King's Master of Revels," he said. "Not that His Absent Majesty ever called upon my services, of course. Still . . . I had talent, I kept in practice. More than one member of the Court was of my devising. Once, I threw a masked ball at which half of those attending had no objective reality whatsoever. The next morning, many a lord and lady woke to discover their bed-mates had been woven of naught but whimsy and thin air."

"I don't understand."

"He creates illusions," Hjördis said. "Very convincing ones. For entertainment. When I was living in a shelter near the Battery, the government sent a glamour-wallah down for the winter solstice and he filled the streets with comets and butterflies." Then, sadly, "Was Tatterwag nothing, after all, but one of your creations?"

Lord Weary cocked his head apologetically. "Forgive an old elf his folies. I made him for a grand role, if that makes any difference. He would have shot me just as I was about to ascend to the Obsidian Throne, and then died in reprisal at the hands of our hot-blooded young hero here." He indicated Will. "Then, lying in his arms, I would have begged Jack to ascend the throne in my place. Which, because he was ambitious and because it was my dying wish, he would have done.

"Alas, my interest in this game has flickered to embers long before I thought it would. What can one do?" He turned to Hjördis. "I suppose you are here for some reason."

"Yes. Your munitions teams have planted explosives on the support beams of the buildings above us. If they are set off, all the johatsu and all the Army of Night will die."

"And this bothers you, I suppose?" Lord Weary sighed. "Foolish child. They were never real in the first place."

Abruptly the cries, shouts, and other noises from below ceased. Hjördis stared over the balustrade down at the suddenly empty tracks and platforms. There were no corpses, no shattered barricades, no mosstroopers or burning wolves, no rebel army, nothing but the common litter of an abandoned subway station. "Then . . . they were all, johatsu and 'troopers alike, your creations? Only Will and I were. . .?"

Lord Weary raised an eyebrow and she fell silent.

At last, she spoke again. "I had thought I was real," Hjördis said in a monotone. "I had memories. Ambitions. Friends."

"You grow maudlin." Lord Weary reached for her. His fingers closed about a mop. This, like the greasy overcoat that had been Tatterwag, he tossed lightly away.

"I'm next, I suppose," Will said bitterly. He clenched his fists. "I *loved* you! Of all the cruel and wicked things you've done, that was the worst. I deserved better. I may not be real, but I deserved better."

"You are as real as I am," Lord Weary said. "No more, no less." He was growing older before Will's eyes. His skin was as pink and translucent as a baby's, but loose upon his flesh. His hair was baby-wispy too and white. The tremor in his voice was impossible to ignore. "Take from that what comfort you can. For my part, I sought to put off enlightenment through treason and violent adventure. But now I see the unity of all things, and it seems that senility has come for me at . . ."

Lord Weary's eyes closed and his head sank down upon his chest. Slowly and without fuss, he faded away to nothing. With him went the balustrade, the gallery, and all the light from the air. Will felt the darkness wrap itself about him like the warm and loving arms of Mother Night.

He did not know if he existed or not, nor did he care. Lord Weary's war—if it had ever begun in the first place—was over.

Will awoke to find himself lying on the subway tracks. He staggered to his feet and then had to leap madly backward as a train came blasting down the tunnel at him.

When his vision returned, Will began to walk.

He'd been plodding along for some time when he saw a haint in the tunnel ahead, wearing the hip waders and hard hat of a sewer worker. "What you doing here, white boy?" he asked when Will hailed him.

"I'm lost."

"Well, you best get yourself unlost. You don't belong down here."

"Point me the way out and I'm gone."

The haint had started to fade through a wall. He hesitated, and leaned back. "Turn around the way you came. Look for a yellow light on the left. They's a door under it that leads out."

So Will did as he said. Vaguely, he remembered encountering this same sewer worker when first he had stumbled into the underground. He had no idea what that meant. Nor did he know how much of what he had seen and felt and done in the past however-many months had actually happened. Friends and foes alike had died—but had they ever existed in the first place? Were Bonecrusher, Epona, Jenny Jumpup, and all the rest real? And if not, did that free him of the obligation to care about them and to mourn their deaths? Try though he might, he could make no sense out of what he had been through.

But when he finally spotted the yellow light shining within its metal cage and the steel door beneath it, he felt a stirring and a rumbling deep within his blood and bones. It was the dragon, laughing. Louder and wilder that laughter grew until it filled up all his being and Will could not help but laugh as well. At what he did not know, unless it was the futility and pointlessness of life itself. He laughed until he cried.

In the silence that ensued, for the first time ever, he heard the dragon speak to him not in emotions but in words.

He began to listen. ○

WARRENER'S BEASTIE

by William R. Trotter

Carroll & Graf, \$16.95 (tp)

ISBN: 0-78671-328-3

Take a chunk of sixties counterculture, some Norse myth, a handful of war stories, put in an aging boomer academic who sees his life as a series of failures, and mix in what looks a lot like a Lovecraftian elder god in an edge-of-the-world setting. That's a pretty fair description of what William Trotter does in this big (686 pages) new "novel of the deep," as a subtitle describes it.

The protagonist, Allen Warrener, is raised by his grandparents after his father dies and his mother abandons him in the closing days of World War II. From his grandfather, a retired general descended from a long line of military men, Allen gets a sense of honor, a love of military history, and a curiosity about strange creatures—particularly the Loch Ness monster and other cryptozoological phantoms. For his junior year abroad, he goes to Scandinavia, where he undergoes two peak experiences. One is an encounter with the supernatural when some sort of spirit helps him find his way out of a dangerous wilderness. But equally memorable is a visit to the Faroe Islands, where he has a brief but overwhelming affair with Elsuba, the daughter of an influential merchant captain and former Faroes naval officer.

He returns to finish college and ROTC, and after graduation is posted to Vietnam. He arrives just in time for the Tet offensive; severely wound-

ed, without firing a shot, he is sent back to the States in the first major setback of his life. An old friend, Preston, invites him to New York, where he falls in with the art film crowd. In between parties, he begins a sweeping autobiographical novel centering on his meeting with Elsuba, only to fall victim to a crushing writers' block. When the art film boom collapses, Preston leaves to try his hand in the burgeoning Atlanta porn movie scene. Financially independent after the general's death, Allen goes back to school and ends up married to Preston's old girlfriend—another disaster, as it soon turns out.

The narrative then jumps to a new character, Karen Hambly, youngest daughter of a North Carolina textile factory worker. Bright and motivated, Karen survives a childhood entrapment in a buried drainpipe to enter the local college where Allen is now teaching. Curious about the sixties—which she is just too young to have experienced first hand—she meets him after a faculty panel discussion in which he talks frankly and dismissively about his days on the scene in New York, then reconnects with him after the inevitable collapse of his marriage.

At this point, the story goes into full gear; Einer, the merchant whose daughter Allen still worships, has offered to fund an expedition to investigate the Vardinoy Phenomenon—a legendary Faroe Islands monster recorded several times over a period of centuries. With Preston (who has gotten rich first as a director of porn,

then of cult horror movies) to film it, a young journalism student to write it up, and a couple of other larger-than-life characters, Allen and Karen head off for the Faroes to learn what lurks beneath the northern seas. Allen clearly sees this as the final chance to make good on all his unfulfilled promises. And not least of the attractions of the trip will be the chance for him to reconnect with Elsuba.

Trotter slowly builds up the monster hunt against a wonderfully exotic background, out on the edge of nowhere, with grim-faced natives and tantalizing hints of a lurking presence creating atmosphere well before any appearance of the beastie. The book isn't perfect; a number of little inconsistencies and anachronisms may annoy readers. But the book's ambition more than compensates for the flaws, and it has a full quota of narrative drive.

Stick with this one; it's a true monster thriller, loaded with memorable characters, that reaches out tentacles to a surprisingly wide range of cultural touchstones of the late twentieth century. In the end, it delivers the goods.

A SHADOW IN SUMMER

by Daniel Abraham

Tor, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-765-31340-5

New writer Abraham begins a fantasy series (the "Long Price Quartet") in which beings with god-like powers are invoked—and effectively enslaved—to serve the interests of a commercial empire.

The story opens in a sort of Zen monastery where young boys are being trained under harsh discipline. One boy seems to have grasped that the brutal treatment being doled out is a test—a way to find the ones who

recognize the reality behind the routine humiliations. And then, having realized what is going on, the student runs away—to the consternation of his instructors, who expected him to rise to the next level in his training as a result of his new understanding.

The scene then jumps to the southern port city of Saraykeht, where great merchant houses control the wealth of the empire. The city has a flavor somewhere between imperial Rome and an Asian trade city like Hong Kong: ancient, polyglot, teeming with wealth and the vice that inevitably follows it. Wilsin, a leading cotton merchant, makes arrangements for a foreign woman to have an abortion—a plan that turns out to have far deeper implications than it at first appears. Caught up in the plan are his senior overseer, her young assistant, and the assistant's lover, a common laborer.

At the same time, Maati, another young trainee fresh from the monastery, arrives in Saraykeht. He is here as apprentice to the city's poet, whose duties have nothing to do with literature. Instead, his job consists of controlling the *andat*, an enslaved god whose power of creating a seedless crop has made the city's cotton trade flourish. Maati quickly learns that the *andat*, whose name is Seedless and who manifests as a handsome young man, is a trouble-maker. Though he is held by the spell created by the poet, the *andat* takes every opportunity to cause mischief.

From this quirky opening, Abraham builds a complex plot, full of intrigue and sudden reversals of fortune. Maati, the young apprentice poet, has learned far more about the job of controlling a god than his teachers ever hinted at. Otah, the laborer, has turned out to have a more

interesting history than his current status might indicate. Atah, Wilsin's overseer, has spent a harrowing period hiding out in one of the city's numerous warehouses. And what starts off looking like a minor bit of shady business has mushroomed into a disaster that threatens the very foundations of the empire. War seems a distinct possibility.

Abraham has an interesting set of distinctive characters, a good sense of plot, and a fresh take on several of the usual fantasy tropes. He's also willing to examine real-world issues a lot of popular fantasy doesn't look at—abortion and violence against women, for example. It'll be interesting to see where subsequent volumes of this series take us.

THE CLAN CORPORATE

by **Charles Stross**

Tor, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-765-30930-0

Stross continues his "Merchant Princes" series, in which Miriam, a young woman from modern America, finds herself able to travel to an alternate America where history has taken different turns. The basic society is feudal in structure, with powerful warlords using their inborn ability to jump between dimensions to build a fortune by supplying illicit drugs and other commodities to the world we inhabit. As Miriam quickly learns, she is a lost member of one of the most powerful families—what amounts to a crime syndicate.

At the end of the second book, Miriam helped thwart a plot against her family by a rival clan working through a third parallel world. But the final shootout damaged the family's main facility in Boston, a key portal to the medieval America. That would be bad enough, but it's also clear that the mayhem has come to

the attention of authorities in the US. So, as the third book begins, the family's leaders have decided to curtail Miriam's freedom. As little as this is to Miriam's liking, it is made very clear that the clan will not hesitate to kill her if she gets out of line.

One immediate consequence of this management decision is that Miriam is now expected to make a suitable political marriage. Much as she would like to resist the clan's plans for her, she has even less appetite for the available alternatives. After convincing herself that she's out of options, she gives in to the pressure.

Of course, that game isn't as simple as it seems. The US authorities have not only noticed the drug-related shootout in Boston, they've recognized that this is not just a simple smuggling ring. With a couple of captured clan members to interrogate, they learn enough to realize that what they're investigating is going to have major security consequences. So a crack team is assembled to find out just what's going on—a team that just happens to include one of Miriam's ex-boyfriends.

Meanwhile, on the medieval side, resentment against Miriam smolders among the old-line aristocracy. Naturally, all the forces manage to come together at once—with a thoroughly violent collision the result.

Miriam's plans are also going badly in the third world—a quasi-Victorian setting, with America still under the British monarchy, and a powerful foreign enemy in France. Miriam has built a business that funnels in new technology—really our technology, with just enough lead time on the local state of the art not to appear completely esoteric. But during her absence, the family has put its own man in charge, and

things have been going straight to hell. Worse, the French appear to have developed a new weapon, evidently a nuclear bomb, which annihilates entire cities with a single blast. And there's every reason to believe they're ready to use it.

Miriam is a resourceful character, impatient with the limits placed on her by both the medieval and Victorian alternate societies. She's also sufficiently realistic to know when she has to play along to avoid worse trouble than she's already in; and she's clever enough to figure out ways around most of her problems—although her cleverness is by no means backfire-proof. And, having eliminated his strongest male character from the first two volumes, Stross brings in the ex-boyfriend at just the right point to give the plot a reasonable amount of sexual tension.

As usual, Stross provides a solid story with strong emphasis on the characters. Equally strong is the way that economic forces underpin the plot and the worldbuilding. Readers who haven't picked up the first two volumes should definitely do so before starting on this one—they're well worth finding. And, as the cliffhanger ending makes clear, there's more to come in this excellent series.

TIME DANCERS

by Steve Cash

Del Rey, \$14.95 (tp)

ISBN: 0-345-47093-1

This one's a sequel to *The Meq*, Cash's historical fantasy about a "lost race" that lives for centuries while retaining the appearance of twelve-year-olds. The first volume took the narrator, Zianno Zezen, known to one and all as "Z," from the 1880s to the end of World War I, in

pursuit of a Meq assassin known as the Fleur-du-Mal, who has killed members of Z's "family"—other Meq and the humans who have helped them and provided homes for them.

As this installment begins, Z returns to St. Louis, where he and his family try to understand what they have learned. A mystical gathering of the Meq, the Remembering, will occur within a hundred years. Five of their number (including Z) carry Stones, objects that apparently will play a role in the Remembering. They also give their carriers hypnotic powers over ordinary humans. They have heard rumors of a sixth stone, of unknown powers. The Fleur-du-Mal's worldwide career of murder and torture is evidently part of a search for the sixth stone.

Now Z and his friends get news of another mysterious Meq, Shesheela the Ninth, who appears in several Renaissance portraits. Unlike the others, she appears to be of African descent; she may also have the key to the sixth stone. To investigate this story, Z travels to Europe, where one thing leads to another, eventually building up (after several years) to another confrontation with the Fleur-du-Mal.

Along the way, he meets the famous jazz dancer Josephine Baker, first in St. Louis, then in Paris. He watches Babe Ruth revolutionize baseball, meets Charles Lindbergh as a young pilot, and learns to skin-dive in the waters off Cuba. In fact, much of the novel consists of Z and his friends traveling around the world and taking in period atmosphere, often just in time to witness some key event of the new century. (For example, one of the Meq provides an eyewitness account of the Nazi bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War.) But encoun-

ters with the ever-resourceful Fleur-du-Mal keep the tension high.

Also, as the story moves forward, the tone of history turns slowly darker, moving inexorably toward another World War. By the end of this volume, the question of the sixth stone is apparently solved. But Z and his beloved Opari are separated, and the Fleur-du-Mal appears to have won a major victory. Readers who insist on fast action should probably take a pass; those who enjoy a slow unfolding of the pageant of history will find much to enjoy here.

THE DNA DETECTIVES

by Anna Meyer

Thunder's Mouth, \$14.95 (tp)

ISBN: 1-56025-863-2

As every cop show on TV seems to reflect, forensic DNA techniques have largely transformed police work. Those same techniques are being used to answer questions in history and archaeology. This highly readable nonfiction account of some of the new insights DNA researchers are uncovering comes from Anna Meyer, a doctoral candidate in Science Communication in Australia.

Meyer begins with an overview of the structure of DNA and its role in heredity, covering the subject succinctly, before getting down to the serious questions. She starts with one of the more hotly debated issues among anthropologists: whether Neanderthals were ancestral to modern humans, or a side branch on the hominid family tree. Before DNA testing, fossil evidence could be interpreted to fit either side of the argument—which involves the larger question whether modern humans descend from several different branches of *Homo erectus* or from a single ancestral branch in Africa. DNA from Neanderthal fossils proved to differ

enough from modern DNA to preclude any Neanderthal contribution to the *Homo sapiens* gene pool—and effectively to tilt the scales in favor of the single-origin theory.

Jurassic Park is the best known of several stories in which dinosaurs are cloned from fossil DNA. At least for the short term, that plot device is fantasy. Meyer reports that DNA appears to deteriorate beyond recovery after about one hundred thousand years—way too short a time for dinosaur revival. Still, there are plenty of more recent extinct critters to try cloning techniques on, notably Ice Age mammoths frozen in Siberia. While to date there's been too little mammoth DNA recovered to make any progress with cloning, there's a plentiful supply of DNA for the Tasmanian thylacine (the marsupial "tiger" or "wolf"), which went extinct in 1934. Researchers predict success in cloning the thylacine by 2010.

Meyer points out that attempts to clone extinct species would raise several questions. Scientific ethicists ask whether our curiosity can justify "bringing back" a creature that has no home in the modern world. For that matter, as *Jurassic Park* makes clear, there's a considerable safety issue in reviving large animals of unknown disposition and habits. Even "domesticated" elephants can be dangerous; what can we expect of a mammoth?

Moas make up a family of flightless birds, some nearly ten feet tall, that roamed Meyer's native New Zealand before the first Europeans arrived. For a long time the number of species of moas was unknown. Now, DNA research has clarified the moa's relation to other flightless birds such as ostriches and kiwis, and shown that some birds once thought to be of different species

were male and female of the same species. Moas were extreme examples of sexual dimorphism, the females often being twice the size of the males.

Meyer also reports research on historical epidemics: the medieval Black Death, the tuberculosis that devastated American Indians after Columbus, and the 1918 flu. DNA techniques haven't always brought a satisfactory conclusion; we still don't know whether the Black Death was bubonic plague or something else entirely, as some researchers believe. On the other hand, research into historical diseases may well help prevent or ameliorate future outbreaks.

The book concludes with several famous cases of contested identity.

Much has been written about the possible survival of Anastasia, youngest daughter of the Czar. Just over a century earlier, the dauphin Charles Louis, reported to have died in prison during the French Revolution was an equally celebrated case. In both instances, claimants appeared and were eagerly welcomed by some adherents of the vanished regimes. Now, DNA analysis seems to have refuted those claims. A more positive result was the identification of a young child who died in the sinking of the *Titanic*.

Meyer provides a solid historical and scientific context for the various cases she examines, making the book especially useful for students and other younger readers. Recommended. ○

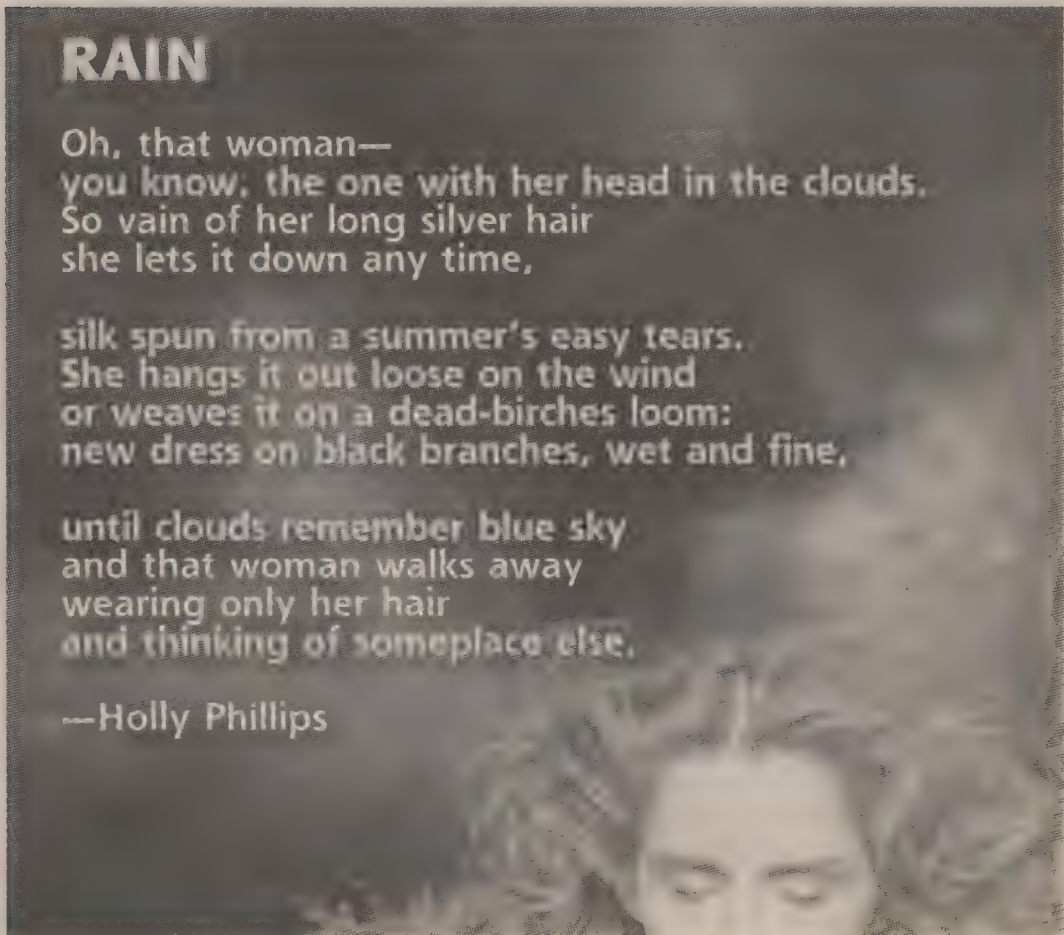
RAIN

Oh, that woman—
you know, the one with her head in the clouds.
So vain of her long silver hair
she lets it down any time,

silk spun from a summer's easy tears.
She hangs it out loose on the wind
or weaves it on a dead-birches loom:
new dress on black branches, wet and fine,

until clouds remember blue sky
and that woman walks away
wearing only her hair
and thinking of someplace else.

—Holly Phillips



SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

There's still time to get out to a convention near you before the holidays. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2006

- 13-15—**AngliCon**. For info, write: **Box 75536, Seattle WA 98175**. Or phone: **(206) 789-2748** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect).
(Web) **anglicon.com**. (E-mail) **anglicon@rocketmail.com**. Con will be held in: the greater Seattle area (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue TBA. Guests will include: none announced. British media SF and fantasy.
- 13-15—**ICon**. **mindbridge.org/icon**. Clarion Hotel, Cedar Rapids IA. C.S. Friedman, artist Larry Price.
- 13-15—**ValleyCon**. **valleycon.com**. Best Western Doublewood, Fargo ND. Shatner, Duane & Morwood, Janny & Don Maitz.
- 13-15—**ScreamFest**. **spookyempire.com**. **punkineaty@aol.com**. Wyndham Hotel & Resort, Orlando FL. Horror.
- 13-15—**Rock and Shock**. **rockandshock.com**. DCU Center/Palladium, Worcester MA. "Music, monsters, mayhem".
- 13-15—**Sweden Nat'l Con**. **imagicon.se/eng**. Royal Inst. of Tech., Stockholm. Joe Haldeman. Much in English.
- 14-15—**ConCept**. **conceptsff.ca**. **conceptsff@conceptsff.ca**. Days Hotel, Montreal QE. French & English Programming.
- 14-15—**MikomiCon**. **mikomicon.com**. **csuanime@gmail.com**. California State Univ. at Northridge, Northridge CA. Anime.
- 14-15—**Irish National SF and Fantasy Convention**. **octocon.com**. In Ireland, probably in the greater Dublin area.
- 20-22—**CapClave**. **capclave.org**. **info@capclave.org**. Hilton, Silver Spring MD (near DC). "Where Reading's Not Extinct."
- 20-22—**ConStellation**. **con-stellation.org**. Huntsville AL. David Drake, Theresa Mather, Stephen Hickman, Glen Cook.
- 20-22—**MileHiCon**. (303) 657-5912. **lindanel@ix.netcom.com**. Denver CO area. No further details at press.
- 27-29—**NecronomiCon**, **Box 2213, Plant City FL 33564**. **stonehill.org/necro.html**. Tampa FL. Lots of hall costumes.
- 27-29—**HallowCon**, **c/o 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741**. **hallowcon.com**. Chattanooga TN. "1001 Arabian Vampires."
- 27-29—**Be Scared**. **boosterevents.com/bescared**. Airport Hilton and Convention Center, Burbank CA. Horror and SF.

NOVEMBER 2006

- 3-5—**World Fantasy Con**, **Box 27277, Austin TX 78755**. **worldfantasy.org**. Renaissance. Cook, Duncan, Denton, Lord.
- 10-12—**WindyCon**, **Box 184, Palatine IL 60078**. (847) 310-0725. **windycon.org**. Rosemont (Chicago) IL. McDevitt, T. Smith.
- 10-12—**United Fan Con**, **26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368**. (781) 986-8736. Marriott. Springfield MA. Media SF.
- 10-12—**TusCon**, **Box 2528, Tucson AZ 85702**. (520) 571-7180 (fax). **home.earthlink.net/~basta**. InnSuites. Ed Bryant.
- 10-12—**AstronomiCon**, **Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603**. (585) 342-4697. **astronomicon.info**. General SF/fantasy con.
- 10-12—**EclectiCon**, **Box 3165, Bayonne NJ 07002**. **eclecticon@rcn.com**. Ramada, Newark NJ. Media fanzines. 18+ only.
- 10-12—**NovaCon**, **379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK**. (0114) 281-1572. United Kingdom. Main British fall meet.
- 10-12—**ArmadaCon**, **4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead, PL3 5HL, UK**. (44 0 1752) 267-873. **armadacon.org**. Plymouth
- 11-12—**India Nat'l Con**. **AP Deshpande at apd1942@hotmail.com**. Revenue Conference Hall, Auranagbad, Maharashtra.
- 17-19—**PhilCon**, **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101**. **philcon.org**. Wyndham Franklin Plaza. 70th anniversary PhilCon.
- 17-19—**OryCon**, **Box 5464, Portland OR 97228**. **orycon.org**. Riverside Marriott. Cory Doctorow, Ellen Datlow, V. Di Fate.
- 24-26—**LosCon**, **11513 Burbank Blvd., No. Hollywood CA 91601**. (818) 760-9234. **loscon.org**. Los Angeles CA area.

AUGUST 2007

- 2-5—**Archon**, **Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132**. **archonstl.org**. Collinsville IL. 2007 No. American SF Convention. \$90.
- 30-Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007**, **Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701**. **nippon2007.org**. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$180+.

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Science Fiction Sudoku Solution from page 77

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JANUARY ISSUE

Next month begins our thirtieth year of exciting, entertaining, award-winning *Asimov's* stories, including many of the stories that everybody's going to be talking about in the months to come!

Our lead story for the January 2007 issue marks the return of a rummy ol' chap whose writings have not been seen in the pages of our rag since at least 2004; of course, we mean the English writer who is all the rage, his stories nominated for Nebulas and Hugos and all that sort of thing, your friend and ours: **Charles Stross**. In his latest, a spiffing romp through the post-Singularity (the way it *ought to be*), a plum cove, the heroically named Ralph, innocently falls into the most inconvenient kinds of difficulties—the kinds of dashed troubles only a half-sister's beer-gozzling miniature pachyderm and a high-maintenance biomechanical girlfriend can afford a man—not to mention that bally fuss with the Emir of Mars's rotten Vizier and his rude eunuchs. What's a poor fellow to do, when he'd rather be having real fun (avoiding self-immolation in the process)? Thankfully, Miss Feng will see it through. This one's got it all: high adventure, romance, booze, mind-controlled zombies, and, worst threat of all, meddling aunties—all that rot—so do us a favor and don't miss "Trunk and Disorderly," what ho!

ALSO IN JANUARY

Nebula and Hugo Award-winner **Nancy Kress** takes a compassionate and compelling look at innocent children who are much more dangerous than they look, in "Safeguard"; Nebula Award-winner **Jack Dann**, returning after a long absence, gives us an all-too-plausible glimpse of the chilling "Café Culture" of the near future; **R. Neube** demonstrates how things can become boring enough in a protracted combat situations that even the *weapons* may choose to become involved in some deadly "Battlefield Games"; critically acclaimed writer **Bruce McAllister** returns to show us how "Poison" doesn't have to come in a vial or a bottle, and how the most insidious sort of all may be the kind in your own heart; **A.R. Morlan**, making her *Asimov's* debut, weaves a fabric from very subtle cloth to make "The *Hikikomori's* Cartoon Kimono"; and new writer **Jeff Carlson**, making his own *Asimov's* debut, takes us out to the wide-open spaces of Big Sky Country for a thrill-packed "Gunfight at the Sugarloaf Pet Food & Taxidermy."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg gets his video-game on in his "Reflections" column to take a look at a peculiar kind of "Farming"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column reveals "The Secrets of the Webmasters (Part Two)"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our January issue on sale at your newsstand on November 14, 2006. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*, either by mail, or online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

BOLDLY GO

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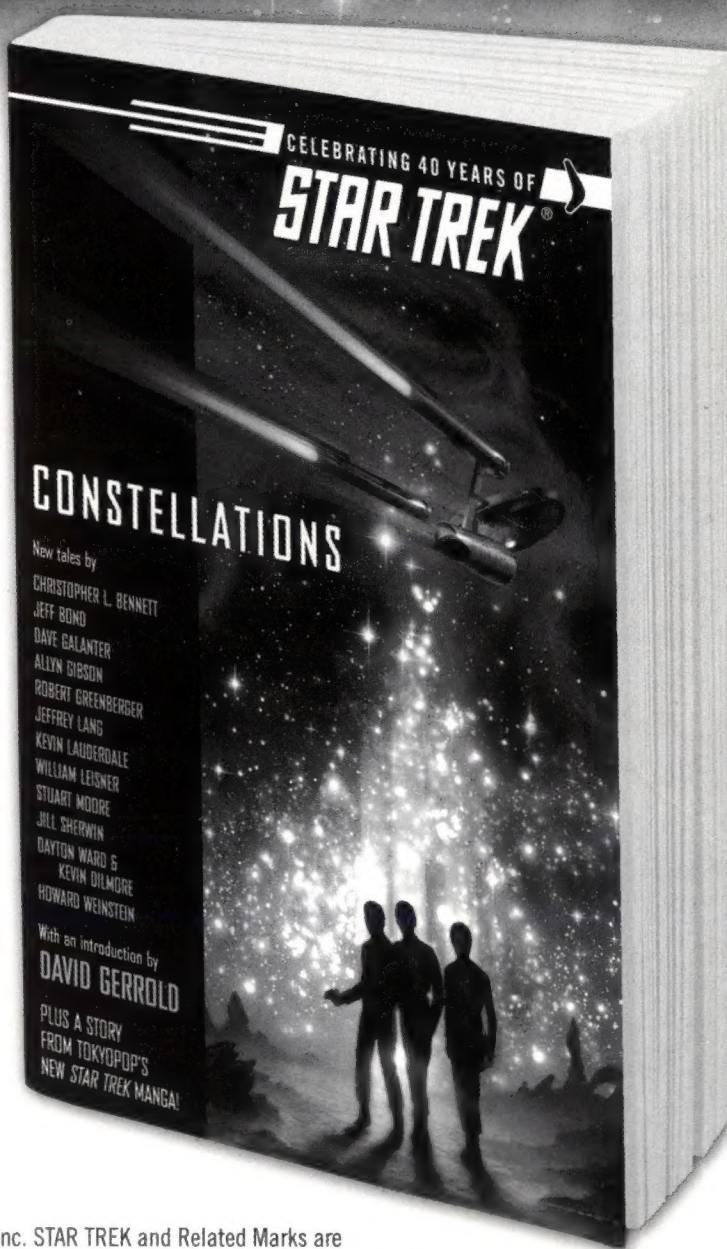
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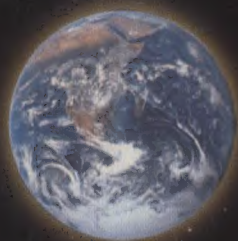
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